



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Research Paper | 4 March 2021

External Initiatives for Regional Security in the Gulf

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Series: [Research Paper](#)

4 March 2021

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Abstract

Two approaches prevail in external initiatives for Gulf security. The first is based on the reality of the region, where conflict and competition are widespread. It assumes that alliance, maximizing of military power and deterrence are necessary to ensure security and maintain the balance of power. The second approach assumes that a comprehensive security structure, which is concerned with cooperation on issues pertaining to the economy, environment, trade, energy, sea lanes security and combating terrorism, is the appropriate strategy to gradually reach a security system that is inclusive of all parties. The recent US policies, which are based on the balance of power, aim to integrate Iran into the Gulf security structure, but by different means. Former President Barack Obama put forward the scenario of Iran's 'participation', especially after the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015, in the hope of controlling its behavior. On the other hand, ex-president Donald Trump's administration withdrew from the agreement in 2018, used a 'maximum pressure' campaign, and established regional alliances to subjugate Iran and negotiate a new deal. Some major powers put forward proposals based on the comprehensive security approach. In 2019, Russia launched an initiative to establish an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Gulf, to include all Gulf countries and in all fields. China presented its Arab Policy Paper in 2016, but it did not unveil specific plans for security in the Gulf. Rather, it seems to be pursuing a 'great patience' diplomacy to promote its interests and making its 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative as a catalyst for expanding its role in the region. Additionally, India has shown interest in increasing its participation in the Gulf security through its strategic partnerships with some states. Pakistan has recently also focused on offering mediation initiatives in the Gulf instead of its traditional alliance approach, primarily with Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: The GCC; Iran; external security initiatives; the Gulf security structure.

Introduction

The Gulf region suffers from conflicts, security threats and competition among its countries. It also remains vulnerable to interference from external powers and competition for influence due to its economic and geopolitical importance. The interests of these powers differ regarding the security situation in the Gulf. While conflicts reinforce the military presence of some, which also results in economic gains, insecurity may threaten their interests as well. Therefore, external powers approach the issue of security in the Gulf in different ways.

Two approaches prevail in external initiatives for the security of the Gulf. The first is based on the reality of the region, where conflict and competition are widespread. It assumes that alliance, maximizing of military power and deterrence are necessary to ensure security and maintain the balance of power. The other assumes that the comprehensive security, which is concerned with cooperation on macro issues such as economy, environment, trade, energy, sea lanes security and terrorism, is the appropriate approach to gradually reach a security system that is inclusive of all parties.

The recent US policy, which is based on the balance of power as it has been for many decades, aims to integrate Iran into the Gulf security system, but by different means. Former President Barack Obama, who focused on breaking the diplomatic deadlock between the US and Tehran, put forward the scenario that emphasized Iran's 'participation', especially after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. Through this approach the US hoped to control Iran's regional behavior and to reduce its potential transformation into a nuclear power. Donald Trump's administration, on the other hand, withdrew from the deal in May 2018 and used a 'maximum pressure' strategy to subjugate Iran to negotiate a new deal. After President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021, the option to negotiate with Iran over the nuclear deal and the regional security situation has become a possibility once again, despite some challenges.

Russia put forward a proposal based on the comprehensive security approach. In 2019, it launched an initiative to establish an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf, to include all the Gulf countries in fields such as military, economy, energy security, environment, and to solve the most urgent problems, to reduce foreign military presence in the region. It proposed this initiative to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in October 2020 as well.

As for China, which is trying to avoid being drawn into regional conflicts, it presented its Arab Policy Paper in 2016 that outlined its strategy in the broad Arab region. In 2019, it hosted the Middle East Security Forum, but it did not present specific ideas and plans for security in the Gulf. Rather, it seems that it is pursuing a 'great patience' diplomacy to promote its interests and is making its "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative a catalyst for increasing its role in the region. It is trying to make its potential proposals appealing in the future, given that it has great interests with both Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

India has also shown interest in the Gulf security through its bilateral strategic partnerships with some states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Iran, where defense and security are areas of cooperation according to these partnerships. Moreover, in the last decade, Pakistan has also focused on offering mediation initiatives to solve crises in the Gulf instead of its traditional alliance approach, primarily with Saudi Arabia.

This article consists of three sections, the first provides a brief overview of the proposals of regional states in the Gulf, as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran, towards a comprehensive security structure in the region. The second discusses the main approaches prevailing in external initiatives for Gulf security. The third explores how major external powers deal with Gulf security and explains their initiatives or policies. The conclusion examines the feasibility of these initiatives and their applicability in the Gulf.

Saudi Arabian and Iranian Proposals for Comprehensive Gulf Security

Before discussing the main approaches in external initiatives for Gulf security and the policies of the major powers in this regard, it is important to briefly look at the proposals of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the regional parties influencing the Gulf. This would help in understanding the extent to which the initiatives and policies of the external powers are in line with the visions of different parties in the region and the feasibility of these initiatives.

Saudi Arabia, along with other GCC states, approached regional security through the balance of power since the establishment of the GCC in 1981. For this purpose, it established the GCC and hosted Western military forces to balance Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, one of the Saudi proposals for collective security was that of former Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal in May 2004. He proposed that the security framework could consist of three components: local, regional, and international. It necessitated “comprehensive reforms” within each country to enhance national security and stability, and to create a regional framework that includes all countries of the region, whereby Iran is committed to multilateral cooperation with its neighbors while refraining from “interfering in the internal affairs of others.”⁽¹⁾ Regarding the international component, he envisaged that this framework would receive support from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This proposal came during the era of former Iranian reformist President Mohammad Khatami. However, since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, Saudi Arabia has no longer proposed such an initiative. Instead, Riyadh has become more involved in confronting the growing Iranian influence in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon than discussing a security framework in the Gulf that might include Tehran.

As for Iran, one of its regional security initiatives in 2007 proposed a ten-point plan that called for the participation of all countries in the region in the security framework, the withdrawal of all foreign

1 Talmiz Ahmad, “Bridging the Saudi-Iran Doctrinal and Strategic Divide: An Indian-led Role to Shape Regional Collective Security,” in Tim Niblock, Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (eds.), *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018), p. 61.

forces, and called for joint security arrangements and strengthening relations in all fields, including nuclear issues.⁽²⁾ In April 2015, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif proposed a collective forum for dialogue in the Gulf, based on the comprehensive security approach. This dialogue, he stated, “could help promote understanding and interaction at the levels of government, the private sector and civil society and lead to agreement on a broad spectrum of issues.” It could eventually include more formal non-aggression and security cooperation arrangements.⁽³⁾ President Hassan Rouhani, in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, disclosed the Hormuz Peace Endeavor, known as HOPE. He stated that “the continuation of the state of mistrust and conflict could only serve the myopic interests of shady foreign forces that feed off endless wars.” In addition, he suggested an inclusive plan that would form a collective cooperation among all Gulf countries and envisage the active participation of the UN. It advocates for “respect for each other’s sovereignty, territorial integrity... the peaceful settlement of disputes, rejection of the threat and use of force... energy security and freedom of navigation.”⁽⁴⁾ However, Iran’s policy objectives are also based on the balance of power approach. It is constantly working to maximize its military power and consolidate its regional influence.

Prevailing External Power Approaches in Gulf Security Initiatives

Initiatives of external powers for Gulf security mainly reflect two approaches: The first is based on the balance of power approach within a realist theory of international relations that emphasizes the “perpetual tendency of conflict between states”.⁽⁵⁾ It holds that power politics guarantees the security and national interests of states; balances of power help to explain state efforts to check the influence of other states, particularly through forming alliances. Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson define balance of power as “a device for the self-defense of nations whose independence and existence are threatened by a disproportionate increase in the power of other nations.”⁽⁶⁾ More than simply equilibrium among states, balance of power entails competition, with states striving to maximize their power to maintain their own security.

John J. Mearsheimer argues that “conflict is common among states because the international system creates powerful incentives for aggression... States seek to survive under anarchy by maximizing their power relative to other states.”⁽⁷⁾ Some see the balance of power approach as “the best guarantee of

2 Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, “The GCC–Iran Conflict and its Strategic Implications for the Gulf Region,” *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2011), p. 268.

3 Mohammad Javad Zarif, “Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran,” *The New York Times*, 20/4/2015, accessed on 15/10/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/38N3cKk>

4 United Nations, General Assembly, “Letter dated 9 December 2019 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General,” Seventy-fourth session, A/74/581–S/2019/933, accessed on 15/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bbExik>

5 Stephen M. Walt, “International Relations: One World, Many Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (Spring 1998), p. 30.

6 Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers, 1985 [1948]), p. 131.

7 John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 12 - 13.

the security of states and the peace of the world.” However, others believe that it has “ruined states by causing most of the wars they have fought.”⁽⁸⁾ It exists when the order is anarchic. Anarchy is not just the absence of government. It is the presence of disorder and chaos.⁽⁹⁾

Over the past four decades, the culture of regional states in the Gulf has been one of geopolitical rivalry, fluctuating between mutual enmity and amity.⁽¹⁰⁾ Sectarian division and regional competition between Iran and the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have led to a zero-sum-game wherein security can only be guaranteed through exclusion, the precedence of regime survival, and alliance with outside powers, perhaps the United States in particular. The GCC had been in the main established to protect its member countries and monarchial regimes and to counter the Islamic Republic in Iran after the fall of the Shah in 1979, and in addition the Baathist regime in Iraq. On the other hand, Iran sought to protect its new ally and to also sometimes export its revolution to the neighboring countries. Both policies failed to create a reliable regional security structure for all Gulf states or to provide stability.

As for the external major powers, the geopolitical competition over the Gulf region has contributed to the prevalence of the international balance of power approach as well. After the British withdrawal from the Gulf in the early 1970s, the US worked to fill the vacuum to prevent the Soviet Union or any regional state that supported it at that time (such as Iraq) from extending its influence over an oil and gas-rich region of vital importance to industrial economies. Under the Nixon ‘twin pillars’ Doctrine, the US maintained stability in the Gulf by providing the support necessary to Iran under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.⁽¹¹⁾ With the birth of the Islamic Republic, the US supported the establishment of the GCC, strengthened bilateral relations with Gulf countries and built military bases throughout the Gulf in order to advance its interests, ensure its influence and contain Iran and Iraq. This balance of power remains prevalent in the region to this day.

The second approach, comprehensive security, is based on non-confrontation and non-conflictual relationships. It assumes that security must be provided to all. It entails a shift from zero-sum to positive-sum-games, with no one winning at someone else’s expense. with the envisaged result being stability and security. Comprehensive security confirms that “security should be multi-focused, not limited to a single issue or level of analysis. It brings attention to the fact that security is the concern of multiple levels of analysis: Individual, family, society, state, international system, and humanity.”⁽¹²⁾ Additionally, it recognizes that the security of a nation in the present scenario is not rooted solely in “national security” and “national defense” but also encompasses multidimensional politico-military,

8 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Philippines: Adison-Wesley Publishing, Inc., 1979), p. 117.

9 Ibid., p. 114.

10 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, “Prospects for Peace in the Gulf,” in Ranjit Gupta and N. Janardhan (eds.), *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013), p. 61.

11 Roham Alvandi, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 36, no. 2 (April 2012), p. 338.

12 Adib-Moghaddam, p. 67.

economic, environmental and human concerns.⁽¹³⁾ Such an option upholds strict and observed norms on the non-use of force, the creation of institutions committed to the peaceful settlement of disputes, and significant measures of functional cooperation and integration.⁽¹⁴⁾ Comprehensive security may include cooperative dimensions to overcome parties' traditional security dilemma through joint arrangements and projects enhancing understanding and reinforcing mutual interests. This asserts possible forms of regional cooperation not necessarily based on cultural similarities or focused on security issues, but rather on common interests notwithstanding ideology. Emphasis is also placed on regional cooperation between all countries, starting with common areas such as economy, environment and conservation of marine resources; these can subsequently provide an institutional basis for settling disputes between all countries.⁽¹⁵⁾

Previous experiences can be instructive. The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) held in Helsinki in 1973, and including European countries, the US, Canada, and the Soviet Union, was not only an outcome of result of reduced Cold War tensions and the beginning of multilateral European confidence-building. It was also a tool to promote this approach as a multi-sided structure which foresaw negotiations on several issues, starting from European security and military affairs, through cooperation in economic, scientific, technical, humanitarian, and environmental fields.⁽¹⁶⁾

In 1994, it transformed into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which currently includes 56 countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is another example. It has currently developed over nearly half a century, bringing together states with very different political systems and apparently different interests. The success which it has achieved has come through an ongoing process of defining and redefining Southeast Asia's regional identity and creating norms of collective action.⁽¹⁷⁾ It broadened its objectives to acknowledge "the interwoven relationships of political, economic, social-cultural and environmental dimensions of development and a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security."⁽¹⁸⁾ Some international organizations, – primarily oriented to traditional security and established to provide collective security for a specific region or member states, have modified their main objectives and adopted the concept of comprehensive security. (Such as The North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO). Since its summit in April 2008 in Bucharest, NATO added political, economic, and civic approaches to overcoming traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

13 Priya Ranjan Kumar, "A Comprehensive Security Regime in the Gulf Region: Prospects and Challenges," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2019), p. 480.

14 Tim Niblock, "Collective Security, Security Communities and the Gulf Region," in Niblock, Ahmad and Sun (eds.), p. 13.

15 Emad Y. Kaddorah, *Towards Arab Security for the Red Sea* [In Arabic: Nahwa 'amn Arabi lil bahr al-'ahmar], *Strategic Studies*, no. 22 (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1998), p. 31.

16 Erzsébet N. Rózsa, "Cold War Modalities—Do They Have a Chance in the Gulf?" in Niblock, Ahmad and Sun (eds.), p. 109.

17 Niblock, p. 13.

18 Kumar, p. 482, cited in "ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint," at: <https://bit.ly/3rOIRdU>

The initiatives of External Powers for Gulf Security

The United States

Since the early 1970s the United States' influence and its security approach in the Gulf have been based on maintaining its military presence. The US sought to prevent the influence of the Soviet Union in the Gulf using the 'twin pillars' balance of power policy. This policy and practice also aimed at securing access to energy sources and protecting allies in the Gulf after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as to combat Soviet influence then felt in Southern Yemen and the Horn of Africa. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and subsequent launch of the US-led Operation Desert Storm (1990-91) served to expand American military presence in the Gulf with increased bases and arms sales to GCC states.

Regional developments over the past two decades contributed towards shifts in US policy in the Gulf, generally towards containing *Iranian*, not Soviet, influence in the region. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition had paved the way for increased Iranian influence, as Iraqi Shiite parties loyal to Tehran came to wield control over the government in Baghdad. Disclosure of the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran in August 2002⁽¹⁹⁾ indicated extensive Iranian progress in a nuclear program that could result in the development of a nuclear weapon. Iranian influence in Syria and Yemen increased following the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011. Finally, the US sought reduced entanglement in Middle Eastern wars; President Obama intended to reduce massive US military and political investments in the Middle East. According to Professor of International Affairs Marc Lynch (George Washington University), this meant "not only reducing its material presence but also exercising restraint diplomatically, stepping back and challenging allies to take greater responsibility for their own security."⁽²⁰⁾ Subsequently, President Trump declared the US would disentangle from the Middle East — despite it being a region America's Presidents long considered as vital to national security.⁽²¹⁾ However, the US approach to Gulf security included no commitment to work with states in the region to build a more inclusive security structure encompassing the GCC states, Iran, Iraq, or other important outside powers.⁽²²⁾ The Obama and Trump administrations differed in approaches to integrating Iran into the region's security. The former primarily sought Iran's participation through negotiations, while the latter applied 'maximum pressure' and built new security alliances against Iran.

19 The Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), "Iran," (June 2020), accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3tZlWyl>

20 Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2015), accessed on 15/1/2021, at: <https://fam.ag/37ireeJ>

21 Uri Freidman, "The Consequences of Donald Trump Washing His Hands of the Middle East," *The Atlantic*, 13/10/2019, accessed on 15/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3rXEX2G>

22 Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, "Imagining A New Security Order in the Persian Gulf," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (October 2015), p. 6.

President Obama effectively prioritized *negotiation* with Iran over its nuclear program to prevent it from developing a nuclear weapon. The nuclear deal constituted a possible first step towards a new security order in the Gulf; one that could improve relations between Iran and the GCC states and facilitate a reduction of the US military commitment.⁽²³⁾ Regional stability would reduce any Iranian opportunity or temptation to further intervene. Iran is also, after all, a stakeholder in a more stable region, and in which it would stand to benefit.⁽²⁴⁾ It could help Tehran improve relations with Western countries and ease US sanctions.

Obama believed that there was a need for Saudi Arabia and Iran to coexist, and lest Washington be drawn into fierce sectarian conflicts. “Iran, since 1979, has been an enemy of the United States, and has engaged in state-sponsored terrorism, is a genuine threat to Israel and many of our allies,” he declared, while adding the qualification that GCC states need to “share” the Middle East with their Iranian foes: “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.” he⁽²⁵⁾ In the view of the Obama Administration, the stability and security of the GCC states would be strengthened by the emergence of a more conciliatory Iran.⁽²⁶⁾

Saudi Arabia and some of the other GCC states, especially the UAE and Bahrain, were not satisfied with the nuclear deal and the new US rapprochement with Iran. In the long term, Saudi Arabia may fear that Iran’s participation could give it an advantage in Gulf security, as was the case with the Nixon Doctrine in the 1970s. In addition, Saudi Arabia may fear that friendly US relations with Iran could enable Tehran to overcome Saudi Arabian, UAE and Bahraini objections to Iran’s integration into the regional security structure before their border and sectarian differences are resolved. Of course, Iran stands to benefit from renewed economic relations with the West, and the lifting of sanctions could enable it to develop its civilian and military technologies. Obama’s conciliatory approach with Iran thus contributed to exacerbating rather than mitigating Saudi Arabian, UAE and Bahraini fears, , and increased the regional rivalry with Iran following the signing of the nuclear deal, something that surfaced most notably in Yemen and Syria.

The Trump Administration on the other hand confronted Iran by tightening sanctions and strengthening US’ regional alliances. It sought to re-negotiate the nuclear deal and expand it to include other issues such as Iranian ballistic missiles. It withdrew from the deal in May 2018, stepped up its punitive measures aiming to cut Iran’s crude oil exports to zero, imposed sanctions on Iranian

23 Wehrey and Sokolsky, p. 1.

24 Ross Harrison, “U.S. Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air into a Punctured Tire,” *Research Paper*, March 7, 2019, presented at the Gulf Studies Forum, Doha, Qatar, (December 1st-2nd, 2018), accessed on 12/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3dc5FAk>

25 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. President Talks through his Hardest Decisions about America’s Role in the World,” *The Atlantic*, 7/4/2016, accessed on 10/6/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2HI9JNa>

26 Niblock, p. 2.

institutions and officials, including Foreign Minister Zarif, and labeled the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization as part of the “maximum pressure” campaign.⁽²⁷⁾

For Trump, containing Iran seemed to be the primary goal, and doubling down on US alliances with the GCC states and Israel represented the means for achieving that goal and to further US interests.⁽²⁸⁾ Trump participated in the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, which was attended by 52 Muslim countries, and called explicitly for the international isolation of Iran, with the US President accusing Tehran of fueling “sectarian conflict and terror.”⁽²⁹⁾ Previously, two regional security alliances to isolate Iran, were launched. The Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), also known as ‘Arab NATO’, was declared in Riyadh on May 23, 201, and in comprised the six countries of the GCC, Egypt, Jordan and the US. Initially conceived to build the capabilities of the GCC states to counter Iran without the intervention of outside powers, it simultaneously enabled the US to confront Iran and yet reduce the US regional presence, without allowing China or Russia to gain influence. As a security pillar, MESA seeks to enhance interoperability of members states’ defense systems, through “regional capabilities centers” that would cover “maritime, cyber, air, and missile domains as well as border security, asymmetric warfare, and command and control.” The intended interoperability would certainly impose limits on the region’s increasing arms from Russia and China.⁽³⁰⁾

The second alliance, the International Maritime Security Construct, IMSC, was established in Bahrain on September 16, 2019 after several ships had been attacked in the region, with Iran accused of being behind them.⁽³¹⁾ At that time, a Norwegian tanker and a Japanese tanker were attacked, and the British tanker *Stena Impero* was seized by the Iranian navy. Four ships in the UAE port of Fujairah were also sabotaged.⁽³²⁾

The IMSC includes the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Albania, and aims to secure navigation in Gulf waters, the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman, the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea.

27 The White House, “President Donald J. Trump’s New Strategy on Iran,” 13/10/2017, accessed on 19/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2XRxEtT>; The White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Cutting Off Funds the Iranian Regime Uses to Support Its Destructive Activities Around the World,” 8/5/2019, accessed on 19/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/38Sup9s>; The White House, National Security Council, “A Look at the U.S. Strategy for Iran,” 13/2/2019, accessed on 19/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/39JnMtV>

28 Harrison, p. 11.

29 Emad Y. Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2018), p. 30.

30 Yasmine Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2019, accessed on 19/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bbCWJr>

31 “Pompeo stresses the importance of regional coordination through the Maritime Security Initiative and the Strategic Alliance,” [In Arabic: Pompeo yushadid ‘alaa ‘ahamiyat al-tansiq al-iiqlimii min khilal mubadarat al-‘amn al-bahrii wa ttahaluf al-istratiji], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 26/9/2019, accessed on 20/10/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/3kepirh>; “The International Maritime Security Alliance begins its missions in Bahrain,” [tahaluf al-‘amn al-bahrii al-duwaliu yabda mahamih min al-Bahrain], *Middle East Online*, 7/11/2019, accessed on 20/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3liylmP>

32 “The UAE says four ships were sabotaged near the port of Fujairah,” [al-Emarat taqul arba’ sufun taaradat li takhrib qurb mina’ al-Fujairah], *Reuters*, 12/5/2020, accessed on 20/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UjBA7h>; Jaleah Dortch, “UAE joins naval security coalition in the Gulf,” *Defense News*, 20/9/2020, accessed on 20/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3ljFlzY>

The policy of maximum pressure and strengthening of regional alliances against Iran on and Iranian hardline reactions have served to worsen the region's security quagmire rather than pave the way for conflict resolution or any acceptable regional security system initiative.

Under the Biden administration military escalation in the Gulf began to appear to subside, and the US and Iran issued new statements favoring a return to the nuclear deal despite differences over which side should first fulfil the deals' obligations. The US also signaled that it wished to broaden the scope of the nuclear deal to include other issues such as Iranian ballistic missiles and intervention in regional affairs. Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif commented that "U.S. President Joe Biden can choose a better path by ending Trump's failed policy of 'maximum pressure' and returning to the deal his predecessor abandoned. If he does, Iran will likewise return to full implementation of our commitments under the nuclear deal."⁽³³⁾ Renegotiating the previously signed agreement may encounter some difficulties: Iran's possible refusal to expand the range of issues covered in the deal as per the new US wishes; Iran's demand that all US-imposed sanctions be lifted before it returns to the deal; and Iran's request for "some kind of assurance" that the US "would not simply leave the deal again".⁽³⁴⁾ Zarif called the Biden administration to "begin by unconditionally removing, with full effect, all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or relabeled since Trump took office," adding that "Iran has always been willing to discuss the problems plaguing our region. But the peoples of the region, not outsiders, must resolve these issues."⁽³⁵⁾

The Biden Administration, it asked Iran to fully adhere to the deal and discuss the other issues so that Washington could rejoin it, with White House Press Secretary Jane Psaki declaring that "the timeline for a potential resurrection of the deal is really up to Iran..If Iran comes back into full compliance with the obligations. the United States would do the same, and then use that as a platform to build a longer and stronger agreement that also addresses other areas of concern."⁽³⁶⁾ Notwithstanding the policy positions of different US administrations, integrating Iran into the region's security, preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons, and safeguarding long-term US interests in the region always figure as overriding goals. The balance of power approach continues to dominate US policy towards Gulf security, as well as towards Russia or China – countries that have their own aspirations to fill the security vacuum and pursue Gulf security initiatives.

Russia

Russia engages in the Gulf region and its security as part of its broad activity in Middle East affairs. The Russian Foreign Ministry called for the establishment of the Security and Cooperation Organization

33 Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Iran Wants the Nuclear Deal It Made," *Foreign Affairs*, January 22, 2021, accessed on 12/2/2021, at: <https://fam.ag/2Ziifpw>

34 "Iran says it will comply with nuclear deal if Biden lifts all sanctions," *The Guardian*, 3/12/2020, accessed on 12/2/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2NqAJ4r>

35 Zarif, "Iran Wants the Nuclear Deal It Made."

36 Anne Gearan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden team exploring how U.S. might rejoin Iran nuclear deal," *The Washington Post*, 6/2/2021, accessed on 12/2/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3pieZFj>

in the Persian Gulf (PGSCO) and for convening an international conference on Gulf security and cooperation. This initiative was a follow-up to Russia's late 1990s proposals (later improved, in 2004 and 2007). Moscow considered it a priority for the UNSC, to "normalize and further improve the situation in the Gulf area," and noted that "military and political shocks, outbursts of terrorist activities of the recent years in this region abounding with hydrocarbon resources, are fraught with disastrous consequences for the system of international relations, global economic and energy security." It was presented to the UNSC on 23 July 2019, under the title "Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region" and again on 20 October 2020 with the new title of "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Comprehensive Review of the Situation in the Persian Gulf Region."⁽³⁷⁾

Both proposals share the same ideas and include the following measures: First, the central long-term objective is the creation of a PGSCO. Second, the security system in the Gulf area should be comprehensive; it should be based on respect for the interests of all regional parties involved, in all spheres of security. Third, the principles of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity without external interference are crucial. Fourth, multilateralism is a mechanism of participation of stakeholders. Fifth, all agreements reached on the Iranian nuclear program should be implemented. Sixth, consultations and contacts among stakeholders should lead to the establishment of an action group to prepare an international conference on security and cooperation in the Gulf area. Seventh, exclusion of any stakeholder for any reason is inadmissible. Eighth, the discussion on downsizing the international military presence in the region should be initiated. Finally, renouncement of permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states in the territories of the Gulf states.⁽³⁸⁾

The initiative focused on a comprehensive security approach that would integrate Iran into the security framework in the Gulf in a practical manner through confidence-building measures initiating the cooperation of all parties in all fields as well as through the establishment of a new organization in the Gulf that including all parties. The initiative also focused on reducing the deployment of foreign forces in the region as a prelude to their subsequent exit, implicitly referring to the US military presence.

Iran welcomed the Russian proposal to ensure security in the Gulf, with Foreign Minister Zarif declaring "regional security can only be achieved through cooperation between the Gulf states."⁽³⁹⁾ Indeed, the Russian initiative incorporates some of Iran's ideas for Gulf security. Both countries hold that the security system must include all countries in the region and feature the departure of foreign military forces, the convening of an international conference on Gulf security under UN auspices, and confidence-building measures promoting comprehensive cooperation between all countries of the region in accordance with the dictates of comprehensive security.

37 The Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area," July 23, 2019, accessed on 15/8/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2OwJv1i>

38 Ibid.

39 "Zarif: Iran welcomes the Russian proposal to ensure Gulf security," [Zarif: Iran turahib bi al muqtarah al-Rusii hawl daman 'amn al-Khalij], *BBC Arabic*, 9/2/2019, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://bbc.in/3ng6A4H>; "Iran says it welcomes Russian proposal for security in Gulf," *Reuters*, 2/9/2019, accessed on 15/11/2020, at: <https://reut.rs/37fj07b>

The Russian initiative did not spark the interest of the GCC states, who offered no official comment on it, opting to refrain from rejection to maintain friendly relations while respecting their American partners' outright rejection of Russia's efforts the Russian initiative had included approaches previously consistently rejected by the US had. Washington declared that the Gulf region did not need "another mechanism to enhance security" and that Iran was "the main reason why the Gulf is destabilized." US ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft responded to the Russian proposal bluntly: "I understand that you want to establish a security structure in the Gulf to promote stability in the region... I do not agree with the solution that you have proposed. I think that the solution is simpler than that... The UN Security Council has all the tools at its disposal to hold Iran accountable."⁽⁴⁰⁾ Senior Fellow at the US Center for the National Interest (CNI) Paul Saunders stated equally bluntly that "the fundamental problem is Moscow's insistence that peace-making operations can only be conducted on the basis of relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council or upon request of the legitimate authorities of the attacked state, elaborating that, given Moscow's UNSC veto, "accepting this framework would mean accepting Russia's right to block US military action".⁽⁴¹⁾ Professor of Politics and Government at George Mason University Mark Katz also commented: "US officials don't think it would be desirable for Russia to succeed. If a detente is to be negotiated between Iran and the Gulf Arabs, American officials want the US to do this."⁽⁴²⁾

With the United States remaining dominant in the Gulf, Russia will struggle to for an effective role in the region's security. GCC states remain wary of any Russian or Iranian proposals, not only because of their US ally's rejection of the Russian role, but also because Saudi Arabia is averse to any possible emergence of Iran as a dominant partner in Gulf security. Although Saudi Arabia may welcome cooperation with Russia on energy policies or arms purchases, it would not necessarily accept Russia's Gulf security initiatives or welcome an active Russian role in the region's security.

China

Although China has not launched a formal initiative for regional security in the Gulf, it appears to be taking a long-term approach by increasingly linking the Gulf states to its interests. Its strategic One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is likely to be the main driver for this connection, putting Beijing in a position to present its own initiatives, or those of other countries in the region.

China's foreign policy in general underscores the use of diplomatic power instead of military power and places emphasis on "great patience" instead of perfunctory action as a solution to crisis. According to Degang Sun, a researcher at the Middle East Studies Institute in Shanghai, "China's desire is not to be drawn into regional conflicts. It aims to safeguard its growing commercial interests in the

⁴⁰ "US rejects Russia proposal on Gulf security mechanism," *Middle East Monitor*, 22/10/2020, accessed on 22/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3n3gZAJ>

⁴¹ Paul Saunders, "How does Washington see Russia's Gulf security concept?" *Al-Monitor*, 11/10/2019, accessed on 25/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3kaZjRq>

⁴² Ibid.

Gulf... [and] avoids sectarian and geopolitical entanglement... believes that a Gulf collective security structure, albeit critical, would be hard to achieve in the short term.”⁽⁴³⁾

Beijing published its Arab Policy Paper in January 2016, outlining development strategies in Arab countries and signaling readiness for cooperation aimed at win-win outcomes. It affirmed its commitment to peace and stability in the Middle East and provided an official narrative for China's relations with the region.⁽⁴⁴⁾ However, it did not refer to security in the Gulf region, nor to Iran. The GCC found mention in discussion of a “strategic dialogue mechanism”, and in a statement of appreciation for “the active role played by Arab sub-regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council in maintaining regional peace and promoting development.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ China did not define the possible collective mechanisms for such cooperation, especially in the field of security. In January 2016 visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran bilateral relations with each of these countries were discussed, with the focus on China's implementation of the OBOR initiative. Although these visits came in a period of heightened escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia (diplomatic relations between the two were severed after Saudi Arabia's execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, and the subsequent burning of Saudi diplomatic headquarters in Tehran and Mashhad), the Chinese president presented no initiative for reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh, and effectively refrained from any mediating role.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In the same month, the Chinese President delivered a speech at the Arab League headquarters, in which he set out the content and direction of China's engagement with the Arab world. He advocated rejection of the use of force, “zero-sum” mentalities, and the discourse of “spheres of influence.” Instead of power politics, he suggested “dialogue and development” seeking solutions *within* the region would be preferable to any solutions imposed from outside it.⁽⁴⁷⁾ In keeping with this, China welcomed the above-mentioned Russian proposal, with Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying stating that Beijing views peace and stability in the Gulf to be “of utmost importance to ensure safety and development of the region and the world as a whole.” She emphasized the need to “establish good neighborly relations based on mutual respect.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ Additionally, the Chinese President proposed a “1+2+3” cooperation with energy as the core, infrastructure, trade and investment as the “two wings,” and the three fields of nuclear energy, space satellite technology and new energy as the three “breakthroughs”.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Clearly, then, the region falls within China's strategic focus. China's economic interests with the Gulf countries, particularly energy imports, have increased greatly over

43 Degang Sun, “China's Even-handed Taiqi Diplomacy towards the Gulf Security,” in Niblock, Ahmad and Sun (eds.), pp. 72 - 74.

44 N. Janardhan, “Indo-Chinese Cooperation for Gulf Security,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2017), p. 58.

45 “Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper,” January 2016, China.org.cn, accessed on 8/11/2020, at: <https://on.china.cn/2GQCsdA>

46 Sun, p. 80.

47 Ahmad, pp. 58 - 59.

48 “China backs Russian proposal for Gulf security,” *The Arab Weekly*, 3/8/2019, accessed 15/8/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3tZsY6q>

49 “Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper.”

the past three decades. Trade between the two parties increased in value from US\$1.3 billion in 1990 to \$197 billion in 2017, and about \$212 billion in 2019.⁽⁵⁰⁾

That said, China has not rushed to present detailed initiatives or engage in diplomatic efforts to resolve or manage disputes in the Gulf. There are several factors that dictate this conservative approach on the part of China in dealing with Gulf security. China has vital energy, investment and trade interests in the Gulf, yet it apparently shuns security entanglement, preferring to maximize cooperation with all Gulf states (the foremost energy exporters to China) – and move away from alliances with one party against another, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Given the active role Saudi Arabia plays in the Middle East and the Islamic world at large, developing bilateral economic, political and security relations with Riyadh may enhance Beijing's influence, from the Gulf to the Red Sea. Iran is equally an important player in the Gulf and Central Asia with geopolitical weight in the region. At the same time, since the US already has a military presence in many GCC countries, China may seek an economic presence compatible with American and other Western geopolitical interests in the region – to avoid being perceived as the West's opponent. However, in contrast with China's engagement with the great powers, the Gulf region does not appear to constitute a priority for Beijing's diplomacy.⁽⁵¹⁾ China's foreign direct investment flows into Europe totaled \$383.4 billion during the 2005 - 2019 period,⁽⁵²⁾ whereas the total amount that China invested in the GCC states during the 2008 - 2019 period is approximately \$83 billion.⁽⁵³⁾

The OBOR initiative is important to China's foreign policy. Launched in 2013, it aims to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient Silk Road trade routes. A total of 126 countries and 29 international organizations have signed cooperation documents with China on the initiative. From 2013 to 2018, the trade volume between China and other OBOR countries surpassed \$6 trillion and China's direct investment in these countries surpassed \$90 billion.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This initiative could have significance for the Gulf. Yet in practice the GCC does not figure in the developing OBOR framework. OBOR's main communications routes do not lead to or pass through the Gulf, not surprisingly given the conflictual state of Gulf relations. However, OBOR's land routes and communications are projected through the northern part of Iran.⁽⁵⁵⁾ A significant logistical link has already been forged: a train from the Chinese town of Yiwu in Zhejiang province covered the 9500 km distance to Tehran in 14 days.⁽⁵⁶⁾ China may thus stand to benefit from Iran's geographical

⁵⁰ Julia Gurol and Jacopo Scita, "China's Persian Gulf strategy: Keep Tehran and Riyadh content," Atlantic Council, 24/1/2020, accessed on 25/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bS1dGn>; Saeed Ghasseminejad, "Chinese Trade with Persian Gulf Region Grows Despite Pandemic," Radio Farda, 1/5/2020, accessed on 25/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bT9KZl>; Niblock, p. 15.

⁵¹ Sun, pp. 80 - 82.

⁵² "Does China Dominate Global Investment?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, China Power Project, 2019, accessed on 25/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3aIVbww>

⁵³ Gurol and Scita.

⁵⁴ "Xi Focus-Backgrounder: Belt and Road Initiative progress," *Xinhua*, 24/4/2019, accessed on 25/10/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2Zi2KxR>

⁵⁵ Niblock, pp. 21-22, 24.

⁵⁶ Ahmad, p. 58.

position, without the OBOR's routes passing through the Gulf. According to Tim Niblock, Emeritus Professor of Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter, "while the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran makes the proposal for an OBOR-GCC link difficult, the OBOR project could also ultimately provide an incentive for dialogue... China, having good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran and with interests of its own at stake, would be in a good position to initiate and shape a dialogue". Statements made by the Chinese president during his visit to Saudi Arabia echo the desirability of GCC countries being incorporated within OBOR.⁽⁵⁷⁾ A marginalization of the GCC states and lack of overland links with this global project could serve to pressure on the countries of the region to resolve conflicts. China's global networks, commercial, and energy interests in the region all stand to benefit from a stable Gulf.

India

The Gulf region is a major component of India's foreign interests today. The security of waterways linked to India's trade and oil imports is part of India's national security, including the security of the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urged his country to look beyond the immediate neighborhood: "the Gulf region is a part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all neighbors in our wider Asian neighborhood."⁽⁵⁸⁾ An important indicator of India's new "Think West" policy is Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar's 2016 statement: "The prospects of fossil fuel, attractions of a more decisive and high growth India and sharp intra-regional competition have all combined to open up new opportunities for India in the Gulf."⁽⁵⁹⁾ India's hydrocarbon import dependency has been predicted to rise from the current 70 percent to almost 92 percent by 2030. Almost 85 percent of India's oil and gas requirements are met from the Gulf region.⁽⁶⁰⁾

India is interested in its relations with both the GCC states and Iran, insisting that the relations with any one party will not be at the expense of the other. The GCC states constitute India's largest economic partners anywhere in the world; trade, oil and non-oil, investments, remittances, etc., total up to \$200 billion. India seeks GCC investments, looking forward to becoming a hub of finance for infrastructure development and strategic industries. Migration from India to the GCC states is an important socio-economic factor in India, with Indian communities in the GCC sending large portions of their savings to India – a contribution to the economy's growth and development as to the support of their families. Indian employment in the GCC is estimated at seven million expatriates.⁽⁶¹⁾ India has

⁵⁷ Niblock, pp. 24-25

⁵⁸ N. Janardhan, "Gulf's Future Security Architecture and India," in Abubaker Bagader et al. (eds.), *India and the Gulf: What Next?* (Cambridge: Gulf Research Centre Cambridge, 2013), pp. 64 - 66.

⁵⁹ Janardhan, p. 56.

⁶⁰ Ranjit Gupta, "The Arab Spring and India," in Abubaker Bagader et al. (eds.), p. 20.

⁶¹ Emad Y. Kaddorah, "The Geopolitical Significance of the Gulf in India's Strategy," *Siyasat Arabiya*, vol. 8, no. 44 (May 2020), pp. 26 - 27.

had an active policy towards these GCC states recently. In 2015, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the region and signed several strategic partnership agreements covering trade, investment, defense, security, technology, space, and infrastructure with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. These agreements gave importance to India in security cooperation in the region covering maritime security issues, public perceptions of threats, intelligence sharing, defense-related information exchange, military training, and finally, education.

The relationship between India and Iran has generally remained cordial, with no direct conflict erupting between them. The primary focus of their relationship has been on energy security. India is seeking to diversify its sources of oil and gas. Iran, with five percent of the world's crude oil resources and 14 percent of its natural gas reserves, is keen on the Indian market. Iran has become India's second biggest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia. In addition, Iran has a fair amount of defense equipment of Soviet make. Iran has sought India's assistance to service its naval and air force equipment.⁽⁶²⁾ India Ports Global is developing the deep-sea Iran's Chabahar port — widely seen as a counter to China's Gwadar port in Pakistan. Chabahar port, located only about 350 kilometers from Gwadar, is aimed at creating a transit route between India, Iran and Afghanistan.⁽⁶³⁾

India has not submitted any collective security initiative to the Gulf, despite the abundance of its interests and the depth of its relations with the countries of the region. The association of its strategic interests with both the GCC states and Iran has made its policy cautious when it comes to their disputes. In practice, New Delhi benefits from the relative stability that the US military presence in the Gulf provides. Its strategic relations with the US, which are constantly developing, do not cause either side to worry about the other's presence in the region. Moreover, any potential reduction in the US presence in the Gulf could cause India to worry because New Delhi fears that Beijing will fill the vacuum and reinforce the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and in the energy sea-lanes. The US agrees with India regarding China's growing influence. This is clearly demonstrated by the 2017 US National Security Strategy in which India is positively and favorably mentioned, even in the Gulf region witnessing steadily growing Indian influence. The strategy argued that "we welcome India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner... We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region."⁽⁶⁴⁾

India hopes to maintain its neutrality in the Gulf and has not made any security initiatives that any of the parties might consider not in its interest. However, this neutrality, as well as New Delhi's experience in regional cooperation based on comprehensive security, such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), may allow it in the future to offer proposals for security. In fact, its

62 Behzad Shahandeh, "India, Iran, and the GCC: Trilateral Cooperation in the Making," in Abubaker Bagader et al. (eds.), pp. 77–79, 83.

63 Nyshka Chandran, "Indian military scrambles to keep up after China moves to put forces in Africa," *CNBC*, 28/2/2018, accessed on 28/4/2018, at: <https://cnb.cx/2HCtjn5>

64 The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, pp. 46–47, 50, accessed on 26/4/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2CzLLd7>

defense and security relations with all parties in the Gulf have been increasing over the past decade, which could pave the way for more involvement in Gulf security.

Pakistan

Pakistan is of great importance to the GCC states due to its geographical proximity, the large size of the Pakistani workforce in the region, its status as the only Muslim nuclear power, and due to factors of historical, religious, and cultural proximity. It is the second largest external contributor to the security of Saudi Arabia after the US. Pakistan also shares a border with Iran of 912 km, the population overlaps in the border areas, and the largest Shiite population outside Iran is in Pakistan.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Pakistan's policy toward the Gulf region went through two phases. In the first phase, it was heavily involved in the policy of balance of power, while in the second it is trying to play the role of mediator. During the second half of the twentieth century, Pakistan became involved in the international and regional balance of power. It was an ally of the West and that of the Gulf region in the face of the Soviet Union. For instance, it participated in the Baghdad Pact in 1958, which was led by the UK and included Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Pakistan's military collaboration in the Gulf commenced in the 1960s when it assisted the Saudi Air Force in deterring the raids of South Yemen, which was an ally of the Soviets, into the kingdom's southern border. During the 1970s and 1980s, approximately 15000 Pakistani troops were stationed in the kingdom. Pakistan also allied with the US and Saudi Arabia during the Afghanistan war after the Soviet invasion in 1979. In the period after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Pakistan had leanings towards Arab Gulf states, which soured its relationship with post-1979 revolutionary Iran.⁽⁶⁶⁾ After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Pakistan sent military forces to participate in the international coalition led by the US to liberate Kuwait and protect Saudi Arabia from any possible Iraqi attack.

Since 2001, Pakistan has been hoping to play a mediating role in the Gulf conflicts rather than allying only with the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia. Two main factors have changed Pakistan's traditional approach which has contributed to improving relations with Iran. First, Pakistan's relations with Iran improved after a period of their competing policies in Afghanistan due to their respective support for different factions. Pakistan was supporting the Taliban, which took control of Kabul in 1996, against the Northern Alliance that was supported by Iran. In fact, only three countries recognized the Taliban government in the period 1996-2001: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan. Iran, it saw this government as a threat to its national security. Pakistan relinquished its support for the Taliban government after Al Qaeda launched the September 11, 2001 attacks on Washington and New York. Pakistan's distancing itself from the Taliban served to improve relations with Iran. Islamabad appears concerned that the geo-sectarian proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran in

65 Khurram Abbas, "Passive Mediation in Persian Gulf Conflicts: An Analysis of Pakistan's Peace Initiatives," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2019), p. 604; Sajjad Ashraf, "Pakistan's Interests in the Gulf" in Ranjit Gupta and N. Janardhan (eds.), pp. 95 - 96.

66 Abbas, pp. 608-609; Ashraf, p. 103.

the region (particularly after the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen in 2003, 2011 and 2015 respectively) have spread into Pakistani society; Sunni-Shiite sectarian tensions in the country have been fueled by financial and political support from the two Gulf countries.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Pakistan cannot be neutral, like India, in the Gulf region, as it has been an ally of Saudi Arabia for decades. Moreover, its power and external position compared to other major powers, such as the US, Russia, and China, do not allow it to lead a collective security initiative in the Gulf. Nevertheless, it tries to preserve a role in the region, presenting itself as a mediator for conflict resolution.

Accordingly, Pakistan recently launched mediation initiatives in the Gulf region instead of allying with one party against the other. This has been the case in three successive crises: First, after Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Iran in January 2016, Pakistan offered to mediate between the two parties. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif paid visits to Riyadh and Tehran and suggested appointing coordinators from Riyadh, Tehran, and Islamabad to work on criteria to ease tensions between the two countries.⁽⁶⁸⁾ While Iran accepted the mediation, Saudi Arabia did not view this role comfortably because it expected Pakistan's support, support it has received for decades.

Second, following the Gulf crisis on June 5, 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut ties with Qatar, Pakistan offered its good offices to mediate, through high-level visits. Sharif embarked on a visit to Saudi Arabia in June 12 aimed at finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Indeed, the Saudi-Qatari standoff posed a great challenge to Pakistan since it enjoys close economic and geopolitical ties with both Riyadh and Doha. Islamabad receives large revenue from the Pakistani citizens working in both countries. More than 1.9 million Pakistanis live in Saudi Arabia, while Qatar hosts some 115,000 Pakistani nationals. Sharif signed a crucial gas deal with Qatar to ease the country's energy crisis.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani, received a warm reception during his visit to Islamabad on July 18, 2017. While Qatar accepted the mediation, Saudi Arabia asked Pakistan to take a clear position on Qatar and to join it during its diplomatic offensive against Qatar. But Pakistan decided that it would not take sides in the brewing diplomatic crisis.⁽⁷¹⁾

Third, the Yemen crisis has remained one of the most pressing issues between Riyadh and Islamabad. In 2015, Pakistan had rejected the offer to be part of the Saudi-led coalition's campaign in Yemen. The Pakistani parliament voted overwhelmingly to maintain neutrality as the conflict in Yemen played out, denying Riyadh's request for Pakistan to send troops to the Yemeni theater.⁽⁷²⁾ Pakistan has thus

67 Abbas, pp. 609 - 610.

68 Ibid., p. 611; Irfan Haider, "Nawaz stresses peaceful resolution to Saudi-Iran row," *Dawn*, 16/1/2016, accessed on 18/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3pm9w07>

69 "Are you with us or Qatar,' Saudi King Salman asks Nawaz Sharif," *The Hindu*, 14/6/2017, accessed on 18/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/37ix3c5>

70 Shamil Shams, "Pakistan faces a diplomatic conundrum over the Gulf crisis," *DW*, 12/6/2017, accessed on 18/1/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jRtqyW>

71 Abbas, p. 616; "Are you with us or Qatar,' Saudi King Salman asks Nawaz Sharif."

72 Ankit Panda, "Pakistan's Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split," US Institute of Peace, *Special Report*, no. 439 (February 2019), p. 12.

effectively shown a willingness to mediate between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, who took control of Sanaa in September 2014, and who are allegedly receiving support from Iran. Since Pakistan had no influence over the Houthis, it tried to persuade Iran to use its influence for a peace deal. According to former Pakistani Information Minister Fuad Choudhury, Prime Minister Imran Khan floated the idea of mediation during his visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2018.⁽⁷³⁾

Overall, Saudi Arabia has been accustomed to seeing Pakistan as an ally against Iran, since 1979. Saudi Arabia may view Islamabad's neutrality as its loss and Iran's gain in the region's geopolitical rivalry, since this neutrality could deprive the GCC countries of the support of Pakistani forces that had stood by their side for decades. In addition, this new Pakistani neutrality role, combined with the recent improvement in Saudi relations with India, appears to have negatively affected the unconditional political support that Riyadh has been providing to Islamabad in the disputed Kashmir issue, between India and Pakistan. This led to the disputes between Islamabad and Riyadh surfacing in public.

In August 2020, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's made an explicit criticism of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which was, in fact, a veiled criticism of Saudi Arabia, as the organization's headquarters and given the kingdom's great influence over it. He told the OIC to "convene a Council of Foreign Ministers over the burning Kashmir issue, or else Pakistan would call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on ... Kashmir." He added that "Pakistan pulled out of December's [2019] Kuala Lumpur Summit on a Saudi request but now it expected Riyadh to show leadership on this issue."⁽⁷⁴⁾ Pakistan's new approach to neutrality and mediation, and its reluctance to fully support Saudi Arabia in the Gulf may be in India's interest; India has considered Pakistan's close relations with the GCC states to be an obstacle to developing its strategic relations with them. Saudi Arabia, along with other GCC states, has had, in recent years, a growing respect for India as a rising economic power offering rich opportunities.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Pakistan would likely view any further warming of relations between India and these states as coming at its expense.

Conclusion

Discussing the initiatives and policies of major external powers for Gulf security and analyzing the positions and policies of the different regional parties shows that the appropriate circumstances for establishing an inclusive regional structure in the Gulf, based on comprehensive security, are in fact elusive. This is due to several reasons. First, the realist school of power politics is still the dominant guiding principle of the policy makers in the Gulf region where the main objective of the state is to

⁷³ Abbas, p. 614.

⁷⁴ "OIC Criticism," *Dawn*, 9/8/2020, accessed on 14/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3kwG9pz>

⁷⁵ Marvin G. Weinbaum and Abdullah B. Khurram, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 68, no. 2 (Spring 2014), p. 216.

maintain its survival in the system.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Indeed, the balance of power approach prevails in Gulf security due to the ongoing tensions and competition between Iran and some of the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia. Their differences and geo-sectarian rivalry in the region have prompted both parties to maximize their power capabilities. In addition, the GCC states have hosted military bases and improved defense ties with the Western powers, particularly the US, to counterbalance Iran in the region. The Iranian nuclear program and its possible transformation into nuclear weapons have provoked the concerns of the GCC states and Washington.

Second, the differences in political systems between the GCC states and Iran constitute a major obstacle to creating a single regional institutional framework that brings them together and deals with multiple security issues. Under the Islamic Republic in Iran, given its opposition to and competition with the Gulf monarchies, threat perceptions in some GCC states are likely to persist.

Third, the implementation of any comprehensive security framework in the region could change the objectives or structure of the GCC in favor of a new collective security framework that includes all states of the Gulf. In fact, the differences between the main parties in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, are deep, and each is trying to achieve regional supremacy. The GCC is one of the most important regional political and security platforms, from which Saudi Arabia has long been confronting Iran. Given their rivalry, it is inconceivable for Saudi Arabia to consider changing the structure of the GCC to accommodate Iran, and allow the latter to seize the opportunity to dominate the Gulf.

However, other external powers such as Russia, China, and India, which have vital interests and friendly relations with all countries of the region, prefer dealing with Gulf security from another point of view. Their approaches to Gulf security are closely aligned with comprehensive security, which is concerned with cooperation on broad issues and between all countries of the region. Russia is the only external power to have presented a detailed initiative for a security framework in the Gulf and has formally submitted it twice to the UNSC. It insisted on proposing a detailed initiative even though it knows that the US and the GCC states will not accept it, as mentioned earlier. It hopes that its proposed ideas and measures to build confidence among the countries of the region will be a basis for dialogue in the future and a possible alternative to the balance of power approach. However, these proposals are also not without the geopolitical goal of reducing the American primacy in the Gulf and increasing Russia's political role instead.

Other powers such as China and India have not proposed any collective security initiative in the Gulf, but they have expressed interest in developing bilateral partnerships with Iran and the GCC states. Nowadays, China and India fulfil their hydrocarbon and economic needs without the costs of political and military intervention in the region. In terms of security, they both benefit from the presence of the US military forces in the region, which provides the relative stability necessary for

76 Kumar, p. 490.



the continuation of vital economic activities, including safe access for those countries to energy sources. However, the creation of new global communication networks and trade routes that China and India are interested in will necessarily have geopolitical implications. In the long term, these networks, especially the OBOR initiative, are likely to stimulate the Gulf states, including Iran, to ensure stability, and thus China's potential proposals for Gulf security may find resonance in the region.

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