

In Persian Gulf littoral, cooperative security is key

by Hamid Ansari

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India's interests would be best served if stability in the region is ensured this way

The United Nations defines this body of water as the Persian Gulf. The lands around it are shared by eight countries (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), all members of the UN. There is a commonality of interest among them in being major producers of crude oil and natural gas, and thereby contributing critically to the global economy and to their own prosperity. This has added to their geopolitical significance. At the same time, turbulence has often characterised their *inter se* political relations.

A framework

For eight decades prior to 1970, this body of water was a closely guarded British lake, administered in good measure by imperial civil servants from India. When that era ended, regional players sought to assert themselves. Imperatives of rivalry and cooperation became evident and, as a United States State Department report put it in 1973, 'The upshot of all these cross currents is that the logic of Saudi-Iranian cooperation is being undercut by psychological, nationalistic, and prestige factors, which are likely to persist for a long time.' The Nixon and the Carter Doctrines were the logical outcome to ensure American hegemony. An early effort for collective security, attempted in a conference in Muscat in 1975, was thwarted by Baathist Iraq. The Iranian Revolution put an end to the Twin Pillar approach and disturbed the strategic balance. The Iraq-Iran War enhanced U.S. interests and role. Many moons and much bloodshed later, it was left to the Security Council through Resolution 598 (1987) to explore 'measures to enhance the security and stability in the region'.

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Any framework for stability and security thus needs to answer a set of questions: security for whom, by whom, against whom, for what purpose? Is the requirement in local, regional or global terms? Does it require an extra-regional agency? Given the historical context, one recalls a Saudi scholar's remark in the 1990s that 'Gulf regional security was an external issue long before it was an issue among the Gulf States themselves.'

The essential ingredients of such a framework would thus be to ensure: conditions of peace and stability in individual littoral states; freedom to all states of the Gulf littoral to exploit their hydrocarbon and other natural resources and export them; freedom of

commercial shipping in international waters of the Persian Gulf; freedom of access to, and outlet from, Gulf waters through the Strait of Hormuz; prevention of conflict that may impinge on the freedom of trade and shipping and: prevention of emergence of conditions that may impinge on any of these considerations. Could such a framework be self-sustaining or require external guarantees for its operational success? If the latter, what should its parameters be?

The GCC and the U.S. link

The past two decades have revalidated William Fulbright's observation that statesmen often confuse great power with total power and great responsibility with total responsibility. The war in Iraq and its aftermath testify to it. The U.S. effort to 'contain' the Iranian revolutionary forces, supplemented by the effort of the Arab states of the littoral (except Iraq) through the instrumentality of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC (May 1981), to coordinate, cooperate and integrate to 'serve the sublime objectives of the Arab Nation' initially met with success in some functional fields and a lack of it in its wider objectives.

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In the meantime, geopolitical factors and conflicts elsewhere in the West Asian region — Yemen, Syria, Libya — aggravated global and regional relationships and hampered a *modus vivendi* in U.S.-Iran relations that was to be premised on the multilateral agreement on Iran's nuclear programme agreed to by western powers and the Obama Administration but disowned by U.S. President Donald Trump whose strident policies have taken the region to the brink of an armed conflict.

Perceptions of declining U.S. commitment to sub-regional security have been articulated in recent months amid hints of changing priorities. This is reported to have caused disquiet in some, perhaps all, members of the GCC, the hub of whose security concern remains pivoted on an Iranian threat (political and ideological rather than territorial) and an American insurance to deter it based on a convergence of interests in which oil, trade, arms purchases, etc have a role along with wider U.S. regional and global determinants.

An evolving transformation

It is evident that a common GCC threat perception has not evolved over time and has been hampered by the emergence of conflicting tactical and strategic interests and subjective considerations. The current divisions within the organisation are therefore here to stay. These have been aggravated by the global economic crisis, the immediate and longer term impact of COVID-19 on regional economies, the problems in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the decline in oil prices.

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One credible assessment done recently suggests that in the emerging shape of the region, ‘Saudi Arabia is a fading power, UAE, Qatar and Iran are emerging as the new regional leaders and Oman and Iraq will have to struggle to retain their sovereign identities. The GCC is effectively ended, and OPEC is becoming irrelevant as oil policy moves to a tripartite global condominium. None of this will necessarily happen overnight and external intervention could interfere in unexpected ways ... But it is fair to say that the Persian Gulf as we have known for at least three generations is in the midst of a fundamental transformation.’

With the Arab League entombed and the GCC on life-support system, the Arab states of this sub-region are left to individual devices to explore working arrangements with Iraq and Iran. The imperatives for these are different but movement on both is discernible. With Iran in particular and notwithstanding the animosities of the past, pragmatic approaches of recent months seem to bear fruit. Oman has always kept its lines of communication with Iran open; Kuwait and Qatar had done likewise but in a quieter vein, and now the UAE has initiated pragmatic arrangements. These could set the stage for a wider dialogue. Both Iran and the GCC states would benefit from a formal commitment to an arrangement incorporating the six points listed above; so would every outside nation that has trading and economic interests in the Gulf. This could be sanctified by a global convention.

Record shows that the alternative of exclusive security arrangements promotes armament drives, enhances insecurity and aggravates regional tensions. It unavoidably opens the door for Great Power interference.

India's ties

How does India perceive these developments and how do they impact our strategic interests and concerns? Locating the Persian Gulf littoral with reference to India is an exercise in geography and history. The distance from Mumbai to Basra is 1,526 nautical miles and Bander Abbas and Dubai are in a radius of 1,000 nautical miles. The bilateral relationship, economic and political, with the GCC has blossomed in recent years. The governments are India-friendly and Indian-friendly and appreciate the benefits of a wide-ranging relationship. This is well reflected in the bilateral trade of around \$121 billion and remittances of \$49 billion from a workforce of over nine million. GCC suppliers account for around 34% of our crude imports and national oil companies in Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi are partners in a \$44 billion investment in the giant Ratnagiri oil refinery. In addition, Saudi Aramco is reported to take a 20% stake in

Reliance oil-to-chemicals business. The current adverse impact of the pandemic on our economic relations with the GCC countries has now become a matter of concern.

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The relationship with Iran, complex at all times and more so recently on account of overt American pressure, has economic potential and geopolitical relevance on account of its actual or alleged role in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Iran also neighbours Turkey and some countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region. Its size, politico-technological potential and economic resources, cannot be wished away, regionally and globally, but can be harnessed for wider good.

India has eschewed involvement in local or regional disputes. Indian interests do not entail power projection; they necessitate in their totality, peace and regional stability, freedom of navigation and access to the region's markets in terms of trade, technology and manpower resources. Indian interests would be best served if this stability is ensured through cooperative security since the alternative — of competitive security options — cannot ensure durable peace.

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