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Gulf Security: From zero-sum games to regional cooperation?[*]

International and regional actors in the Gulf

Looking at the Gulf region, there are three regional great powers to be identified, namely Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, as well as five regional small powers, namely Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. Saudi Arabia and the latter five states cooperate within the 1981 founded Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the only functioning regional framework for cooperation.

By and large the constitution of the states in the region must be regarded as weak, as there is no strong or generally agreed-upon idea of the states or internal socio-political cohesion[1]. With the exception of Iran they are new states, and they face problems with ethnic and/or religious minorities. Some of them have long-standing border disputes with their neighbors. Their administrative capacities are limited and their legitimacy is very much linked to the ability to generate outputs, and not so much to the acceptance of the political system itself. Given the size of its population, Iran is usually regarded as the most powerful actor in the region, yet it has to deal with considerable economic problems such as high unemployment and inflation rates, and its economy is in urgent need of modernization. As a result of the international isolation that Iran faces because of its non-compliance with UN Security Council demands regarding its nuclear program, these problems have intensified over recent years. Iraq, for its part, has still to recover from the civil-war-like conditions that plagued the country after the US invasion of 2003. Kurds, Sunnite and Shiite Arabs have yet to find a new political *modus vivendi,* as can be seen from the difficult and still pending formation of a new government based on the result of the March 2010 election. And even in the case of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), their ability to adequately react to

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[1] B. MÖLLER, *Regional Security: From Conflict Formation to Security Community*, in B. MÖLLER (ed.), *Oil and Water, Cooperative Security in the Persian Gulf*, London, 2001, pp. 7-8.

Abstract

This paper seeks to outline a differentiated picture of the security situation in the Persian-Arab Gulf. It will conceptualize the Gulf as a regional security sub-complex, to use the term coined by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, and elaborate on the main regional actors, their constitution, the distribution of power between them as well as the region's security culture and practices. Based on these considerations, the paper will propose a set of policy recommendations for the international community. It will argue for a broadening of the Gulf's security agenda in order to create potential for a gradual shift from a zero-sum toward a more cooperative balance of power system.

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political, strategic, and economic challenges is subject to debate: while some argue that their wealth allows them to adapt considerably well[2], others see the long-term stability of the Gulf monarchies in doubt[3]. In addition to the above-mentioned states, somewhat on the regional margins is Yemen, today regarded as a fragile state more concerned with its own domestic affairs than with regional or international politics.

As sub-state actors, the Kurds in particular are a factor in regional affairs and an important actor in the new Iraq. Moreover, both Sunni and Shiite strands of Islam are present in the region and play a factor in regional and local conflicts. Tribal and family structures build very strong networks across the region. In Yemen, tribes even control their own territories in the North and East of the country. In addition to that, al-Qaida and related terrorist groups challenge all countries in the region, in particular Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq.

Since the emergence of the Gulf region as a strategic, geographic space, it has also gained a prominent place on the international security agenda. For this reason, various external actors have continuously played an important role in

regional affairs. After the First World War, the UK was the main actor in terms of guaranteeing Western strategic interests and ensuring some degree of regional stability. Following the British withdrawal in the early 1970s, the US took over this role as the external balancer and intervening factor, cooperating with regional allies but also becoming evermore militarily engaged in the region's affairs. As a result of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the strong presence of US troops there, the US almost took on the character of a regional actor in its own right.

Yet there are also other actors seeking a stronger regional role: France, which traditionally has close relations with North Africa and the Levant, recently discovered the region as a potential partner[4]. The establishment of a French military base in Abu Dhabi in 2009 reflects this new ambition. During the Cold War period the Soviet Union never managed to take on an influential role in the region, due to its lack of regional allies. Only recently did Russia develop a political approach to the region and formulate a regional policy[5]. In addition,

actors such as India, Brazil and China have also developed a greater interest in regional affairs, either to ensure the security of their energy supplies, as a result of a changed ambition with regard to international affairs and/or in the context of the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, with Turkey, Syria and Egypt, powers from the immediate neighborhood have also repeatedly played a role in the Gulf.

Security practices in the Gulf

The Gulf region can be regarded as a *realpolitik* balance-of-power system par-excellence. Balance-of-power alignments took place between the three regional powers Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia (plus the GCC countries) and were at times supported by outside actors. Over time, however, the regional rivalries were increasingly loaded with ideological and religious questions which led to an intensification of the conflicts.

Following the revolution and the end of the monarchy in Iraq in 1958, Iran and Saudi Arabia regarded Iraqi nationalism and republicanism as a challenge to their own political systems or their regional ambitions and cooperated with the support from the US to contain Iraq[6].

[2] J. KOSTINER, *Conflict and Co-operation in the Gulf Region*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag, 2009 p. 23.
[3] K. NIETHAMMER, *Familienbetriebe mit Anpassungsschwierigkeiten*, SWP Studies 19, 2008.

[4] F. DAZI-HÉNI'S, *French Defense and Security Policy in the Gulf*, in Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ed.), *France and the Arabia Gulf*, Abu Dhabi, 2007, pp. 45-69.
[5] M.A. Smith, *Russia and the Persian Gulf. The Deepening of Moscow's Middle East Policy*, Conflict Studies Research Center, Middle

East Series, vol. 7, no. 25, London, 2007.
[6] H. FÜRTIG, *The Mechanisms of Power-Balancing in the Persian Gulf: Internal Factors – External*

Yet, as Riyadh was also wary of Iran's greater power resources and its regional ambitions, it tried to soft-balance Iran through diplomatic measures within OPEC and by claiming a religious leadership role. This strategy of "omnibalancing" is a characteristic element of Saudi Arabia's security policy that is also partly reflected in its dealing with domestic challenges[7].

The 1970s arguably marked a period in which regional balancing efforts achieved a delicate peace. Yet the situation shifted dramatically when Iran's internal constitution – and related to that its regional role – changed as a result of the Islamic revolution in 1979.

Within the region, Iranian-Saudi relations took a negative turn as Iran challenged Saudi Arabia's religious authority and claimed that monarchic rule was incompatible with Islam, thereby questioning the political systems of the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, Iran regarded itself as the leader of the Shiites and tried to instigate radical Shiites in the Gulf Arab

countries where the Sunnites held the power.

Yet, it was the relationship between Iran and Iraq in particularly that eventually deteriorated. Both countries had always had an ambiguous relationship, but the Iran-Iraq war that started with the Iraqi offensive against Iran in 1980 and the way the hostilities were pursued finally turned the rivalry into enmity[8].

Iranian-Saudi relations worsened to a degree where Saudi Arabia began to regard the secular Pan-Arab ideology of Iraq as less worrying than the religious challenge posed by Iran[9]. Hence, when Iran succeeded in pushing back Iraqi troops from its territory and began a counteroffensive in 1981, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia particularly, supported Bagdad more openly[10]. While not all members of the newly-founded GCC supported Iraq as strongly as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait did, none of them supported Iran. Officially, though, the GCC remained neutral in the Iran-Iraq war.

From the Iranian perspective, however, the role of the GCC countries constituted an act of alignment with Iraq. Yet, with the exception of some military strikes on Gulf

tankers as well as some small-scale attacks on Kuwait, it refrained from direct retaliation and used asymmetric means instead when it supported a coup d'état in Bahrain, and terrorist bombings in Kuwait, as well as an assassination attempt on the Kuwaiti emir.

The US and the USSR remained officially neutral as well, however, they too were supporting Iraq as a counter-force against Iran and its apparently religion-driven regional agenda.

Not only the international isolation, but in particular the international silence regarding Iraq's repeated use of chemical weapons against Iran left a particularly bitter legacy from the international stance on the Iran-Iraq war. This experience had a deep impact on Iran's collective memory, and was arguably one of the original drivers for Iranian programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD)[11].

When the war eventually ended in a ceasefire, it was regarded internationally as a victory for Iraq. The Saudi leadership's immediate reaction to this was a shift in its regional policy to balance Iraq and seek a new *modus vivendi* with weakened Iran[12]. The improvement in

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Challenges, in M. KAIM (ed.), *Great Powers and Regional Orders. The United States and the Persian Gulf*, Aldershot, 2008, pp. 120-141 (122-123).

[7] G. NONNEMAN, *The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Patterns Shifts and Continuities*, in L. POTTER - G. SICK (eds.) *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, New York, 2006, p. 170; J. KOSTINER, *Conflict and Cooperation…*, cit., p. 17.

[8] Cf. S. BAKHASH, *A Troubled Relationship: Iran and Iraq, 1930-80*, in L. POTTER - G. SICK (eds.), *Iran, Iraq,…*, cit., p. 12.
[9] G. NONNEMAN, *The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War…*, cit., pp. 169-172.
[10] *Ibidem*, pp. 174-178.

[11] Cf. J. HILTERMANN, *Outsiders and Enablers: The Consequences and Lessons from International Silence on Iraq's use of Chemical Weapons during the Iran-Iraq War*, in L. POTTER - G. SICK (eds.) *Iran, Iraq,…*, cit., pp. 158-159.
[12] H. FÜRTIG, *The Mechanisms of Power-Balancing…*, cit., p. 127.

Saudi-Iranian relations intensified as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and continued even after the US-led coalition had expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. This was accompanied by a general change in style and substance of Tehran's foreign policy *vis-à-vis* its neighbors in the Gulf. Iran now pursued a strategy of achieving a new security architecture that emphasized Gulfisation, i.e. aimed at a reduction of foreign – and particularly US military – presence in the Gulf and the strengthened role of Iran as a guardian of regional stability[13]. Hence, the ambition already displayed by the Shah re-emerged under changed circumstances.

Yet neither the Gulf Arabs nor the US were ultimately willing to cede this role to Iran, and instead Washington proposed that the GCC countries rely on the US to guarantee their security and accept a US military presence to that end. Subsequently, the US introduced a policy of dual-containment – an attempt to maintain regional stability by keeping both Iraq and Iran in check.

Tehran responded with a strategy to approach other partners, such as Russia and China, and employed a spoiler-tactic that aimed at undermining the Gulf Arabs, subverting the Arab-Israeli peace process, and expanding Iran's regional influence through proxies such as Hezbollah[14].

Yet, neither within the region, nor in Washington, was this situation regarded as sustainable, and in the second half of the 1990s Washington as well as Tehran sought to improve their relations[15]. Iranian-Saudi relations saw an improvement as well, as both sides even started discussing security cooperation on non-state security threats, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and crime[16].

Yet, the hardliners around Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei successfully subverted US-Iranian rapprochement when Khamenei bluntly rejected US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's admission that the US had made mistakes when they supported the toppling of the Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeqh in 1953 and turned a blind eye on Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran[17].

However it was not the (failed) rapprochement between Iran and the US or Tehran and Riyadh that changed the strategic landscape, but a regime-change in Iraq, the regional pariah that had been contained in the second half of the 1990s through multilateral sanctions and repeated military strikes from the US.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and with the increasing influence of neo-conservative ideologies in Washington, the concept of preventive regime change became a viable option that was ultimately implemented through the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. For Washington policy-makers, it was envisaged that Saddam Hussein's regime would be quickly replaced by a liberal and democratic government that would serve as an example for other countries in the region, essentially generating a democratic domino effect and preparing the ground for a region of "democratic peace" – not only in the Persian-Arab Gulf, but in the Middle East as a whole. The fatal consequences of this strategy, however, quickly became apparent as it led to chaos and civil war-like conditions in Iraq.

The challenges of regional disorder after the regime change in Iraq

For security affairs of the Gulf the US invasion resulted in a change of polarity, since Iraq as one of the three great regional powers was essentially taken out of the game. Although the removal of the actor that most other regional players regarded as responsible for at least two of the major wars that had ravaged the region

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[13] *Ibidem*, pp. 129-130.

[14] J. KOSTINER, *Conflict and Cooperation…*, cit., pp. 180-183.
[15] Very forcefully brought forward by Z. BRZEZINSKI - B. SCOWCROFT - R. MURPHY, *Differentiated Containment*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 76, no. 3, May/June, 1997.
[16] Cf. J. KOSTINER, *Conflict and Cooperation…*, cit., pp. 186-189.
[17] *Ibidem*, p. 190.

(the Iran-Iraq war as well the First Gulf War) did not create a democratic domino effect, it arguably opened a "window of opportunity"[18] to seek a new modus for organizing regional security.

Yet, this opportunity was lost, particularly when US-Iranian relations worsened: instead of positively responding to Iranian overtures and regarding Tehran as a potential partner, the US administration treated Iran as a destabilizing factor. Hence, after the initial quick victory in Iraq in 2003, there appeared to be considerable probability that the US would seek a military regime change in Iran, too.

This option seems not to be on the table anymore, but the relationship between the US and Iran is still tense and in particular Europeans and Americans seek to isolate Iran internationally. The dispute about the Iranian nuclear program is in greater danger of escalation. It has security implications not only for the Gulf states, but also beyond the region: Israel regards the Iranian program as the single most important threat to its security and also countries like Jordan, Egypt and Turkey are concerned about Iranian capabilities and intentions.

Yet, in addition to the confrontation over the Iranian program, the Gulf region faces various other challenges today:

Notwithstanding the improved security situation in Iraq, the inability of the political parties to form a new government based on the results of the March 2010 elections shows that the consolidation of the Iraqi political system and social interaction between religious and ethnic groups has still a long way to go. Moreover, the country is still challenged by al-Qaida terrorism.

However, not only Iraq, but also Yemen struggles with internal problems. The country faces secession movements in the North as well as the South, and is increasingly developing into a new hideout and operational launching pad for al-Qaida and affiliated terrorists.

The region's key conflict, however, is that between the remaining great powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia. While relations between the two countries have never been easy, they changed for the worse after the US invasion of Iraq. While Saudi Arabia heavily opposed the US attack in the first place, it saw its regional position challenged by Iran after Saddam Hussein's regime had been removed in Iraq.

Hence, when Mahmud Ahmadinejad became Iranian president in 2005, his rhetoric not only amplified Israel's concerns, but the subsequent neoconservative influence on Iranian policy making also heightened Saudi fears. Moreover, trust-

building efforts of the GCC countries, such as the invitation for President Ahmadinejad to attend the GCC summit in 2007 or the Saudi king's *hajj* invitation for Ahmadinejad, failed to achieve a sustainable positive impact on regional relations.

Conclusion and suggestions

When the established power structure with three regional poles disappeared after the US invasion of Iraq, it left Iran and Saudi Arabia with a strong US military presence in the Gulf to find a new modus to address their security concerns. While Iran feels threatened by the US and others, and therefore seeks to bolster its capabilities and strengthen its regional influence, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states regard the Iranian behavior as threatening. Moreover, all countries are uncertain about which role a consolidated Iraq will play in regional affairs in the future.

In this context there have been repeated suggestions to establish a new security architecture to overcome the Gulf's security dilemma[19]. Yet, looking at the region's tradition and the developments since 2003, it is easy to discern that the relation-

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[18] Cf. C. KOCH - F. NEUGART (eds.), *A Window of Opportunity: Europe, Gulf Security and the Aftermath of the Iraq War*, GRC, Dubai, 2005.

[19] Cf. the overview provided by M. BAUER - C. DANNHEIM - C. KOCH, *Gulf Security: Between Balance of Power and Collective Security*, Conference Overview Paper, Berlin, March 2010. (http://www.cap.lmu.de/download/2010/2010_Gulf_Security_Concepts_overview.pdf).

ships are dominated by mistrust and enmities that seem to be deeply rooted in the respective narratives.

Against the background of this established security culture, an approach that over-focuses on structures to redress the Gulf's security deficiencies or even aims at addressing Gulf security and other Middle Eastern conflicts in a single institutional framework seems unfeasible. Instead, it appears more appropriate to regard the Gulf as a distinct regional security sub-complex, take the regional security culture and distribution of power as the starting point and identify processes and issues that will allow a gradual shift from the current zero-sum calculation of security to more cooperative balance-of-power practices in the Gulf. This would be clearly less ambitious than a general overhaul of political relations in the region, but seems more realistic taking into account the realities on the ground[20].

- At the *strategic level*, a focus should be placed on consolidation of the regional balance of power. Since the regional balance is clearly in favor of Iran, this would require a strengthening of the GCC, including Western security guarantees for its GCC allies, as well as the con-

tinuation of efforts to stabilize Iraq. In particular, efforts along the former line might be interpreted as threatening by Iran. Hence, they have to refrain from any "regime-change-rhetoric" *vis-à-vis* Tehran. In addition, invoking a "military option" with regard to the nuclear program would be counterproductive. Both threats lack credibility on the one hand and only strengthen the hardliners in Tehran on the other.

Moreover, more active involvement of additional actors in the region, such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, Japan or Turkey, might offer another tool for consolidating the balance of power and positively influence political affairs in the region. These actors might also play a role as mediators in the conflict over the disputed Iranian nuclear program. Turkey and Brazil have been quite active in this regard, even though the Americans and Europeans did not support their initiatives in the end.

- Notwithstanding the existing mistrust, all regional actors have stipulated an interest in regional cooperation. This should be taken up in order to initiate *operational measures* to cooperate on non-state security issues as well as low-politics topics such as countering illegal migration, drugs trafficking and counterterrorism. Focused cooperation on some of these topics within the

GCC and between GCC countries and Iran already exists and should be expanded in intensity and scope. Additional topics such as water management, disaster response or education and research might be added. Looking at the Gulf's neighborhood, there is also much potential for cooperation on Afghanistan or on the problem of piracy at the Horn of Africa.

These cooperation projects should reach across existing or potential lines of conflict, be issue-oriented, functional in character, limited in scope and ambition, and where deemed useful, supported by external actors. Efforts of this kind would not affect the strategic balance in the region, but would support the establishment of political practices that are more favorable to cooperation.

- Last but not least, these strategic and operational measures should be complemented by *public diplomacy* efforts that build trust and confidence. At the decision-maker level, this should include a joint statement of Iran, Iraq and the GCC countries to accept the validity of already agreed-upon international norms such as sovereignty, non-interference, renunciation of threat or actual use of military force etc. for the Gulf region. This would be a highly visible gesture that would underscore the regional

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[20] For a more detailed discussion of the points raised in the following paragraphs see: M. BAUER - C.-P. HANELT - C. KOCH, *The EU-GCC Partnership. Security and Policy Challenges*, Al-Jisr Policy Brief, Dubai, 2010.

actors' commitment to preserve regional peace and accept their obligations under international law. Moreover, to put such diplomatic endeavors on a more sustainable basis and generate a long-term effect, they should be augmented by direct contacts between societies.

Arguably, these steps do not offer a reinvention of the Gulf's security architecture. Instead, the proposed re-establishment of the region's balance of power is intended to reduce the existing strategic uncertainties. Complementary efforts to engage in concrete cooperation projects and trust-building measures can mitigate fear and enmity.

The international community should focus its efforts along these lines in order to allow for a gradual shift away from a zero-sum conception of regional security affairs towards a more cooperative understanding of the balance of power in the Persian-Arab Gulf.