



REBALANCING REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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February 2020

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25613/n8xe-hj20>

Introduction

Spiraling tensions in the Persian Gulf have placed immense strain on a regional security structure that was itself in a state of flux even prior to the pattern of attacks on maritime and energy targets that began in May 2019. Developments since then, up to and including the January 3, 2020, killing of Qassim Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq, have exposed the limitations of a status quo in the Persian Gulf that emerged in the 1980s and has changed little in 30 years. The fallout from the spike in U.S.-Iran tension has caused longstanding partners in the Arabian Peninsula to question and second-guess the deterrence value of U.S. security guarantees they had for decades taken largely for granted. While the unpredictability of the Trump administration's approach to regional (and international affairs) looks set to continue until the November election, and probably beyond, the convergence of a set of deeper regional trends may, paradoxically, lead to greater balance in Gulf security in the longer-term.

This research paper examines how underlying shifts in security dynamics in the Gulf may evolve as regional states respond to the perception of receding U.S. leadership by further diversifying security relationships and internationalizing what until the 2010s had been a solidly Western-centric web of partnerships. It begins by analyzing how the security structures that developed in the 1980s and 1990s achieved neither a workable regional order nor a viable security community in the Persian Gulf. This leads to a second section that analyzes how regional *perceptions* of U.S. policy during both the Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump administrations created conditions of great uncertainty among U.S. partners. Concerns about their possible "abandonment" multiplied in key Arab Gulf capitals in 2019 with each successive "incident" in and around the Persian Gulf. The third and final section explores how the diversification and internationalization of security relationships may eventually lead to greater balance in the region, as new participants likely will resist the pressure to "take sides" in regional standoffs.

Regional Security Under Strain

What amounts to the present regional security architecture in the Persian Gulf—the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in close partnership with the U.S., and Iran and Iraq excluded—evolved during the 1980s and early 1990s. Its emergence was not a foregone conclusion, despite the upending of the regional order caused by the Iranian revolution in 1978-79 and the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Fahd and Prince Abdullah (both future kings) initially welcomed the Islamic nature of the Iranian revolution, with Fahd stating, in January 1980, that "the new regime in Iran is working under the banner of Islam, which is our motto in Saudi Arabia," and Abdullah telling the *Gulf News Agency* that "The Holy Quran is the constitution of our two countries, and thus links between us are no longer determined by material interests or geopolitics."¹

¹ Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (London: Hurst & Co, 2018): 66-67.

However, attempts by the Khomeini regime to export its brand of revolutionary political Islam and foment unrest in regional Arab states quickly put paid to any initial optimism.² Iranian state radio announced in January 1980 a plan to create a force to export the revolution and the following month broadcast a call for a revolt against the Saudi royal family.³ In late 1981, an Iranian-linked group, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, was accused of plotting a failed coup to overthrow the Bahraini ruling family.⁴ The start of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980 also exposed the Gulf states to the prospect of overspill from the fighting, with Kuwait being hit by missiles on two occasions in the opening months of the war.⁵ After years of discussion of various plans for a regional organization, what became the GCC was put together at speed between February and May 1981 in response to the threats to stability from both Iran and Iraq.⁶ As Kuwaiti political scientist Abdul Reda Assiri noted, a decade later, the GCC emerged from “the exigencies of realpolitik, to shield the member states, as well as their societies from unconventional threats.”⁷

Although discussions for an eight-country bloc (including Iraq and Iran) had been held in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia in 1975 and in Muscat in Oman in 1976, by 1981 the impact of revolution and war meant that Iran and Iraq were excluded from the Gulf states’ vision of regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf. By 1981, therefore, two of the elements of the regional dynamic—the GCC as a (loose) bloc of (relatively) like-minded states and the exclusion of Iraq and Iran—had appeared, as had the contours of the third—the U.S. role in regional security, although this occurred in fits and starts throughout the 1980s. While President Jimmy Carter proclaimed in his January 1980 State of the Union address that “Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force,” this was a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, rather than directed against Iran or in support of any of the Gulf monarchies.⁸

Looking back from the standpoint of 2020 at the growth of the U.S. military “footprint” in the Gulf, it is important to recall that this took years to develop and was in response to specific events rather than part of any underlying plan. The United States did not

² Lawrence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co, 2008), 177.

³ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

⁴ Hasan Tariq Alhasan, “The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: the IFLB in Bahrain,” *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 604-06.

⁵ Gerd Nonneman, “The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War: Pattern Shifts and Continuities,” in eds. Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 175.

⁶ Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, “The Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature, Origin and Process,” in ed. Michael Hudson, *Middle East Dilemma: The Politics and Economics of Arab Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 154.

⁷ Abdul Reda Assiri, *Kuwait’s Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 76.

⁸ Gary Sick, “The United States and the Persian Gulf in the Twentieth Century,” in ed. Lawrence Potter, *The Persian Gulf in History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 298.

automatically or immediately fill the void left by the British after their withdrawal from longstanding defense and security partnerships in the Gulf in 1971. The U.S. did acquire the airbase at Masirah in Oman from the Royal Air Force in 1975 and signed a 10-year access to facilities agreement with Sultan Qaboos of Oman in 1980, but its presence in the Gulf did not expand significantly until the late 1980s.⁹ These new agreements added to the existing web of U.S. security agreements with Saudi Arabia and the small U.S. naval detachment that had been based in Bahrain since 1949.¹⁰

The first trigger for the more visible U.S. military posture in the Gulf was the escalation of attacks on international merchant shipping and regional oil and gas facilities as the Iran-Iraq War progressed. The number of attacks on merchant shipping jumped from 71 incidents in 1984 to 111 in 1986 and then surged to 181 the following year, when targeted vessels came from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.¹¹ And yet, the administration of President Ronald Reagan initially rebuffed a request from Kuwait for assistance in protecting its shipping, as officials were anxious to avoid a potentially open-ended commitment, and reversed course only after Kuwait approached the Soviet Union instead. The subsequent internationalization of Gulf waters occurred as the U.S., the U.K., France, Italy, and the Soviets all sent warships to conduct convoy operations that protected Kuwaiti vessels during the “Tanker War” phase of the Iran-Iraq War in 1987 and 1988.¹² The U.S. Navy also attacked Iranian naval ships in the Persian Gulf in “Operation Praying Mantis,” a sharp retaliatory strike in April 1988 after a U.S. frigate was damaged by an Iranian-placed mine.

Two years later, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the U.S. assembly of a 34-nation coalition to liberate Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War cemented the U.S. as a permanent feature of the regional security landscape. After the war, and contrary to an initial condition set by King Fahd that all U.S. forces should leave Saudi Arabia once Kuwait was liberated, some 37,000 U.S. troops remained in the kingdom once the bulk of the coalition presence was withdrawn in May 1991.¹³ The U.S. also signed additional defense cooperation agreements with Kuwait and Bahrain in 1991, Qatar in 1992, and the UAE in 1994, and returned a sizeable troop presence to Kuwait in September 1994 after Saddam Hussein again massed troops on the Iraq-Kuwait boundary.¹⁴ These agreements and the response to the new threat from Iraqi aggression prompted the administration of President Bill Clinton to expand U.S. naval and military assets in the Gulf as part of a policy of “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran as the 1990s gave way to the 2000s.¹⁵

⁹ Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 191-92.

¹⁰ Gause, *International Relations of the Gulf*, 127.

¹¹ Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy*, 113-14.

¹² Ibid. In the U.S., the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers as American and their escorting by the U.S. Navy was known as “Operation Earnest Will.”

¹³ Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World*, 129 and 134.

¹⁴ Anthony Cordesman, *Kuwait: Recovery and Security After the Gulf War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 127-29.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The contours of the contemporary regional security structure had therefore taken shape well before the additional shocks of the September 11, 2001, attacks and the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq by U.S.-led forces in March 2003. The U.S. role in the Gulf had been transformed from an “over-the-horizon” posture in the 1980s into an embedded feature of the Gulf states’ defense and security calculus in the 1990s, which itself inhibited any meaningful GCC-wide initiatives, and left Iraq and Iran excluded. However, none of these developments contributed to the creation of a security community in the Persian Gulf or even to a semblance of a viable, still less a stable, regional order. Visions of regional security suffered from the binary opposition between the American refusal—shared by several GCC partners—to accept Iranian involvement in any regional framework, and Iran’s insistence that the withdrawal of external (American) forces was a *sine qua non* of any regionwide security architecture.

Even within the GCC states, the persistence of neighborly tensions inhibited the formation of a security community capable of defending its members against external threat, due in part to mistrust among the six states and a continuing preference to conduct their defense relationships on a bilateral basis.¹⁶ Kuwaiti officials had previously appealed to the GCC to deploy a contingent of the GCC’s Peninsula Shield Force to secure its border with Iranian-occupied Iraqi territory in 1986 and been astonished when their request was denied.¹⁷ Four years later, it was not a coincidence that the first call for assistance the Kuwaiti government made on August 2, 1990, was to the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait City rather than to the GCC or any of its members.¹⁸

The years after the Gulf War were marked by boundary disputes between Saudi Arabia and Qatar (in 1992), Bahrain and Qatar (until 2001), and Saudi Arabia and the UAE (until 2010), allegations of espionage made by Oman against the UAE (in 1994, 2011, and 2018), as well as claims of Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini involvement in an aborted coup attempt in Qatar in 1996 that prefigured the same three countries’ diplomatic isolation of Qatar two decades later, first in 2014 and subsequently since 2017.¹⁹ Such tensions, combined with the display of U.S.-led force in liberating Kuwait, meant that rulers in all GCC states opted to deepen their security dependency on the U.S., more so than with each other, in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁰ One result was to draw the GCC states directly into the tense relationship between the U.S. and Iran as the hosts of bases and force deployments that formed the cornerstone of American power projection in the region.²¹

¹⁶ Yoel Guzansky, “Defense Cooperation in the Arabian Gulf: The Peninsula Shield Force Put to the Test,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 644-45.

¹⁷ Assiri, *Kuwait’s Foreign Policy*, 102.

¹⁸ Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 82.

¹⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 30-31.

²⁰ It took the GCC 30 years to agree on an internal security agreement that all six states could agree on, with Kuwait blocking proposals to harmonize internal security coordination in 1982 and then again in 1994 out of concern they would undermine the greater rights and freedoms in Kuwait; an updated version of the agreement was only finally ratified at the GCC Summit in December 2012, after the Arab Spring, and even then the Kuwaiti parliament restated its opposition to it.

²¹ “Threats to the Gulf States in the Regional and International Environment” (workshop discussion, Sixth Gulf Studies Forum, *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, Qatar, December 7-8, 2019).

By the time the Arab Spring rocked large parts of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, the three major Gulf wars of the 1980s, 1991, and the 2000s attested to the failure to develop a workable regional order or security community in the region. Moreover, the surge in sectarianism that followed the 2003 Iraq War added a combustible new dimension to regional geopolitics as relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and respective proxy groups became increasingly polarized and zero-sum in nature.²² Once the initial tremors of the Arab Spring had subsided, tensions within the GCC states came to the surface and placed intra-GCC splits at the forefront of regional political divides. Just as the Trump administration sought to rally its Arab partners behind its attempt to exert “maximum pressure” on Iran, the inability of the GCC to present a unified response against a shared external threat became glaringly obvious.²³

Perceptions of Drift

Perceptions matter in shaping and influencing policymakers’ views of the world around them and the options they feel are open to them at any given time. During the Obama years, a sense of “abandonment” by the U.S. arose in certain Gulf capitals as ruling figures expressed concern over the U.S. decision to accept the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and subsequent election victories for the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴ Officials in GCC states expressed further frustration at being cut out of the negotiations between the U.S. and Iran and later between the P5+1 and Iran that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. Tensions were palpable at a U.S.-GCC summit held at Camp David in May 2015 when the emirs of Kuwait and Qatar were the only GCC heads of state to attend, as King Salman of Saudi Arabia pointedly chose to stay away.²⁵

For many observers in GCC capitals, their sense of incomprehension at U.S. policy during the Obama administration was encapsulated in the phrase “pivot to Asia,” even though this always was more rhetoric than reality, and never implied that it was the Persian Gulf that was being pivoted “away” from.²⁶ One Gulf leader went so far as to ask a visiting American dignitary “where’s the coach?”, “I don’t know where the coach is” in an apparent reference to the lack of visible U.S. leadership or regional policy.²⁷ Regional figures reacted strongly to a March 2016 interview Obama gave to *The Atlantic* during which the president had said “free riders aggravate me,” despite there being no explicit reference to any of the Gulf states in his comment, which appeared in context to have been directed against the U.K.²⁸ A

²² Bassel Salloukh, “The Sectarianization of Geopolitics in the Middle East,” in eds. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017), 49.

²³ “Regional Security at 40” (roundtable discussion, annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, New Orleans, November 16, 2019).

²⁴ David Kirkpatrick, “The White House and the Strongman,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2018.

²⁵ Helene Cooper, “Saudi Arabia Says King Won’t Attend Meetings in U.S.,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2015.

²⁶ Abdullah Al Shayji, “The GCC-U.S. Relationship: A GCC Perspective,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014): 60.

²⁷ Andrew Parasiliti, “Djerejian: In Addressing Uprisings in Middle East, First ‘Do No Harm,’” *Al-Monitor*, November 19, 2019.

²⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

former Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Prince Turki al-Faisal Al Saud, responded furiously in an op-ed in *Arab News* that began “No, Mr. Obama. We are not ‘free riders’.”²⁹

In a sign that feelings of ill-will were mutual, Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser throughout Obama’s two terms in office, told *The New Yorker* that the Saudis and Emiratis were “more responsible for the image of Obama as being soft in the Middle East than anyone else. They trashed us all around town.”³⁰ The breakdown in trust and confidence was a factor in the Saudi and Emirati decision to launch “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen on March 26, 2015, the same day the P5+1 and Iran began an intense week of negotiations in Lausanne that produced a framework agreement on the nuclear deal on April 2. Angered at being cut out of the P5+1 process, the military intervention in Yemen signaled to the White House and the international community that the Saudis and Emiratis rejected the idea that it was possible to focus solely on one issue (Iran’s nuclear ambition) at the expense of the broader picture of what they saw as regionally destabilizing Iranian behavior.³¹

Officials in GCC states, especially in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, largely welcomed the Trump administration and made strenuous efforts to reach out to key figures in the new White House as they settled into office in 2017.³² While the Trump White House has provided political support to its GCC partners engaged in the Yemen war by blocking congressional pressure to end the conflict, and resisted calls to hold the Saudi leadership to account for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the volatility and unpredictability of Trump’s unconventional approach to regional policymaking has, gradually, sapped regional confidence in a second consecutive U.S. presidency. Further doubts were generated by Trump’s initial and subsequent responses to the blockade of Qatar launched by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt in June 2017. Trump’s initial support for the move and his castigation of Qatar as a sponsor of terror at the highest level, caused shockwaves in Doha and called into question the entire basis of Qatar’s defense and security planning, while his later reversal in favor of a mediated solution was greeted with dismay by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which had courted White House support for the move.³³

For the first time in the post-1990 era, it had not been the U.S. that was seen to have come to the defense of one of their number when faced with external threat. This realization caused concern in Kuwait City and Muscat, to say nothing of the consternation in Doha, as it called into question, as never before, the role of the U.S. as the security guarantor of last (or, indeed, first) resort.³⁴ For the Saudis and the Emiratis, that moment of reflection came two years later, in 2019, when the lack of a U.S. response to the attacks on maritime shipping and

²⁹ Turki al-Faisal Al Saud, “Mr. Obama: We Are Not ‘Free Riders,’” *Arab News*, March 14, 2016.

³⁰ Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Prince’s Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, April 2, 2018.

³¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Why Have the Gulf States Intervened Militarily in Yemen?” *Houston Chronicle*, March 27, 2015.

³² Desmond Butler and Tom LoBianco, “The Princes, the President, and the Fortune Seekers,” *Associated Press*, May 21, 2018.

³³ Guy Taylor, “U.S. Interests at Risk in Arab Allies’ Bitter Feud,” *Washington Times*, October 4, 2017.

³⁴ Author interviews with diplomats from Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar in Washington, D.C., August 2017, June 2018, August 2019, and October 2019, and with Qatari officials in Doha, May 2018 and January 2019.

energy infrastructure prompted a reassessment of the very basis of deterrence.³⁵ The newfound sense in GCC capitals that they were more on their own than they may ever have thought possible is likely what prompted the sudden flurry of outreach to Iran, directly or via intermediaries, that began after the Abqaiq and Khurais attacks and intensified after the killing of Soleimani and the Iranian response.

A White House in disarray produced “policy without process,” as a very senior former official who retired in 2019 put it.³⁶ This breakdown in the traditional structure and discipline of decision-making was manifest in sudden breaks with settled policy (and subsequent reversals or pullbacks), such as Trump’s December 2018 declaration (on Twitter) that the Islamic State had been defeated in Syria and that U.S. forces would withdraw; or the White House announcement in October 2019 of a pullout of troops from northeast Syria, a decision widely perceived as abandoning Syria’s Kurds, hitherto a partner of U.S. forces in the battles against the Islamic State; to a Turkish military incursion that started days later.³⁷ The fallout from the December 2018 announcement led Secretary of Defense James Mattis and the special presidential envoy for the global coalition to counter ISIL, Brett McGurk, to resign in protest, while the October 2019 announcement came after a telephone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and against the advice of U.S. military leaders.³⁸

The cavalier and peremptory manner by which Trump seemingly dismissed the longstanding American partnership with the Kurds, and the way he was perceived to have gone against political and military views in doing so, made an impression on policymakers in GCC capitals.³⁹ If Trump could abruptly abandon the Kurdish-led forces in Syria that had fought alongside U.S. counterparts in the battles against Islamic State, might he do the same, on a larger scale, to the Gulf states, as he had appeared momentarily to do to Qatar in 2017? The doubts over the reliability of the U.S. as a partner that had first appeared in regional capitals in and after 2011 widened during Trump’s second and third years in office.⁴⁰

In 2019, the pattern of attacks on maritime and energy targets in and around the Persian Gulf in 2019—widely linked with but not formally attributed to Iran or its

³⁵ “Gulf Regional Security” (workshop discussion, Doha Forum, Qatar, December 14, 2019).

³⁶ Author participation in a symposium on U.S.-Arab Gulf relations, June 2019. An additional example of “policy without process” that directly affected the Gulf States was the preparation for Trump’s first foreign trip as president, to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, when the White House rebuffed State Department offers to provide briefing notes and background papers in advance of the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh.

³⁷ Mark Landler, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, “Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring ‘We Have Won Against ISIS’,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2018; Elias Groll and Lara Seligman, “Trump Abandons the Syrian Kurds,” *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2019.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “The European Union and the GCC: The Path to a New Relationship” (workshop discussions and sideline meetings, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Brussels, October 14, 2019).

⁴⁰ Declan Walsh and Ben Hubbard, “With U.S. Help No Longer Assured, Saudis Try a New Strategy: Talks,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2019; Liz Sly, “The UAE’s Ambitions Backfire as it Finds Itself on the Front Line of U.S.-Iran Tensions,” *Washington Post*, August 11, 2019.

regional proxies—brought to a head the growing concerns in GCC capitals about the reliability of a partnership that once seemed sacrosanct.⁴¹

Tensions in the Persian Gulf escalated almost immediately after the Trump administration launched its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran in April and May 2019 with the introduction of new sanctions on Iranian officials, further restrictions on exports of Iranian oil, and the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, including the Quds Force commanded by Qassim Soleimani, as a foreign terrorist organization.⁴² A series of “incidents” of varying severity began within weeks to target the maritime and energy sectors linked to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two U.S. partners that had been the most hawkish toward Iran as well as the most closely associated with the Trump administration’s regional policy agenda. These included attacks on four commercial ships off the coast of the Emirati port of Fujairah on May 12, a drone attack against a Saudi oil pipeline on May 13, further attacks on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman on June 13, and the shooting down of a U.S. drone on June 20 that reportedly violated Iranian airspace after having taken off from a U.S. airbase in Abu Dhabi.⁴³

Most spectacular of all—and the most cathartic for U.S. partners in the Persian Gulf—was the drone and missile strike on Saudi oil infrastructure on September 14 that targeted Aramco’s giant oil-processing facility at Abqaiq as well as the Khurais oilfield. The swarm of drones and cruise missiles fired from an (as-yet) unknown location evaded Saudi missile defense systems and knocked out, albeit only temporarily, 5.7 million barrels of Saudi Arabia’s total of 9.8 million barrels of oil produced per day.⁴⁴ The scale and the success of the attacks underscored the vulnerability of the expensively procured defensive systems in Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to guard against asymmetric rather than conventional threats.⁴⁵ A “Saudi security analyst,” speaking to *Reuters* on condition of anonymity, captured the sense of shock in the kingdom when s/he stated that “The attack is like September 11th for Saudi Arabia, it is a game changer (...) Where are the air defense systems and the U.S. weaponry for which we spent billions of dollars to protect the kingdom and its oil facilities? If they did this with such precision, they can also hit the desalination plants and more targets.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ “Saudi Arabia Oil Attacks: UN ‘Unable to Confirm Iranian Involvement,’” *BBC News*, December 11, 2019; Michelle Nichols, “Exclusive: UN: Houthis Investigators Find Yemen’s Houthis Did Not Carry Out Saudi Oil Attack,” *Reuters*, January 8, 2020.

⁴² “The U.S., Iran, and ‘Maximum Pressure,’” International Institute of Strategic Studies, *Strategic Comment* 25, no. 14 (May 2019).

⁴³ Michael Shear, Eric Schmitt, Michael Crowley, and Maggie Haberman, “Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, then Abruptly Pulled Back,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2019.

⁴⁴ Summer Said, Jared Malsin, and Jessica Donati, “U.S. Blames Iran for Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2019.

⁴⁵ As David Des Roches, an expert on missile defense at National Defense University, observed, “Most conventional air defense radar is designed for high altitude threats like [ballistic] missiles. Cruise missiles and drones operate close to the Earth, so they aren’t seen because of the Earth’s curvature. Drones are too small and don’t have heat signature for most radar.” Quoted in Stephen Kalin and Sylvia Westall, “Costly Saudi Defenses Prove No Match for Drones, Cruise Missiles,” *Reuters*, September 17, 2019.

⁴⁶ Stephen Kalin and Sylvia Westall, “Costly Saudi Defenses Prove No Match for Drones, Cruise Missiles,” *Reuters*, September 17, 2019.

Just as shocking to leaders in Saudi Arabia and the UAE as the need to urgently reassess threat perceptions and defense capabilities was the Trump administration's reactions to the pattern of attacks between May and September 2019. The lack of a visible U.S. response to the attacks on shipping or to the assault on the nerve center of the Saudi economy made the Saudis and other American partners in GCC states reassess the nature of the U.S. security guarantee they had until then (largely) taken for granted.⁴⁷ Trump denied he had offered the Saudis any pledge of protection after the Aramco attacks and added pointedly that "That was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and that wasn't an attack on us."⁴⁸ The inaction was all the more pronounced when compared with Trump's response to the downing of the U.S. drone in June 2019, when the U.S. launched a cyber attack against Iran's electronic warfare capabilities,⁴⁹ or after the killing of an American contractor and the storming of the U.S. embassy compound in Iraq in December, when Trump ordered the drone attack that killed Qassim Soleimani on January 3, 2020.⁵⁰

Statements by officials and prominent commentators in late 2019 and early 2020 illustrated the concerns many in GCC states felt at U.S. decision-making and prompted policymakers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to re-examine their own hitherto assertive approaches to regional affairs. A delegation from the UAE traveled to Iran in late July 2019 to discuss coast guard and related maritime security issues, shortly after the UAE had announced a troop redeployment and drawdown in Yemen as well.⁵¹ In the weeks after the Saudi attacks in September, the Saudi leadership made discreet approaches to their counterparts in Pakistan and Iraq in a bid to open back-channels of dialogue with Iran to de-escalate tension. Iraq's prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, stated in late September that "There is a big response from Saudi Arabia and from Iran and even from Yemen, and I think these endeavors will have a good effect."⁵² Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, appeared to endorse such sentiment, telling *Al Jazeera* that "Iran is open to starting a dialogue with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region."⁵³

Pronouncements in GCC states increasingly began to diverge from the U.S. approach in the final months of 2019 and later evolved into different reactions to the sharp escalation in U.S.-Iran tension that accompanied the killing of Soleimani and the Iranian retaliation against U.S. military targets in Iraq. Abulkhaleq Abdulla, a retired Emirati academic often described as an advisor to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, blasted Trump after the Saudi attacks, stating that "in his response to Iran, [he] is even worse than Obama (...) Now an Arab Gulf strategic partner has been massively attacked by

⁴⁷ David Kirkpatrick and Ben Hubbard, "Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities Tests U.S. Guarantee to Defend Gulf," *New York Times*, September 19, 2019.

⁴⁸ Steve Holland and Rania El Gamal, "Trump Says He Does Not Want War After Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities," *Reuters*, September 16, 2019.

⁴⁹ Tami Abdollah, "U.S. Struck Iranian Military Computers This Week," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2019.

⁵⁰ Carol Morello, "Trump's Turn to Military Against Iran Shows Limits of Economic 'Maximum Pressure'," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2020.

⁵¹ Liz Sly, "The UAE's Ambitions Backfire as It Finds Itself on the Front Line of U.S.-Iran Tensions," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2019.

⁵² Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War," *New York Times*, October 4, 2019.

⁵³ "Iran Open to Starting Dialogue with Saudi Arabia: Speaker," *Al Jazeera*, October 1, 2019.

Iran—which was provoked by Trump, not by us—and we hear Americans saying to us, ‘you need to defend yourselves!’⁵⁴ After the U.S. decision to kill Soleimani in January 2020, attitudes hardened, with a “Gulf diplomatic source” voicing (anonymously) a concern felt across the GCC that “Our most important ally, a world power who is here on the pretense of stabilizing the region, is destabilizing the region and taking all of us with them without a second thought.”⁵⁵

The Internationalization of Regional Security

This final section analyzes how security trends in the Persian Gulf may evolve as diversifying security relationships further internationalize the region and U.S. interest (if not force projection) recedes. The four decades since 1979 gradually entrenched an increasingly zero-sum approach to regional affairs as relations between the U.S. and Iran, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia, became polarized. It is likely that the convergence of several patterns described in this paper may shift this dynamic in a new and different direction in the 2020s. As the hitherto heavy reliance of GCC states on the U.S. for defense and security partnerships gives way to a multiplicity of such ties, it is improbable that states such as Russia, China, India, or Japan will pick sides in regional disputes to anything like the same degree the U.S. has done.

The “Asianization” of the Persian Gulf is a process that has been unfolding since the 2000s in tandem with the broader realignment of world economic centers of gravity. Already by 2010, the volume of exports from the six GCC states to Japan, South Korea, India, and China was over three times higher than the combined export figure to the U.S. plus the (then) 27 EU member-states.⁵⁶ Asian economic powerhouses are additionally far more dependent than Western states on the Persian Gulf (including Iran and Iraq) for energy imports. By 2019, Asian buyers accounted for more than 80% of crude oil and condensates that passed from Gulf ports through the Straits of Hormuz. China (19%), India (16%), Japan (15%), and South Korea (13%) were the four largest takers of Persian Gulf crude exports, compared with 6% for the U.S.⁵⁷ Figures for July 2019 showed that Saudi Arabia exported 1.74 million barrels of crude oil per day to China compared with just 161,000 barrels per day to the U.S, while year-end figures for 2019 as a whole showed a 47% year-on-year jump in Chinese crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Kirkpatrick and Hubbard, “Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities.”

⁵⁵ Taylor Luck, “Iran Crisis: Why Gulf Arabs Increasingly See U.S. As a Liability,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 8, 2020.

⁵⁶ Thierry Kellner, “The GCC States of the Persian Gulf and Asia Energy Relations” (working paper, French Institute of International Relations [IFRI], October 2012), 1.

⁵⁷ Julian Lee, “Which Oil Buyers Have the Most at Stake as Mideast Tensions Rise,” *Bloomberg*, June 26, 2019.

⁵⁸ Brian Wingfield, “Saudi Arabia is Steering Ever More Oil to China, Draining the U.S.,” *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2019; Muyu Xu and Chen Aizhu, “China Oil Imports from Top Supplier Saudi Arabia Rise 47% in 2019: Customs,” *Reuters*, January 30, 2020.

For the most part, inroads made by Asian economic partners in Persian Gulf states focused primarily on commercial and investment links and had at most only a limited security or defense component. Significant Chinese investments in Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi and Duqm in Oman were designed to create regional hubs for Chinese industrial and manufacturing interests.⁵⁹ To the extent that these investments were part of China's Belt and Road scheme, they represented "part of a much larger strategic approach to the Middle East."⁶⁰ While greater investment has been augmented by a series of Gulf port visits by Chinese naval vessels in recent years, China, as well as other states such as India, South Korea, and Japan, maintained a discreet security profile in the broader region, engaging on specific issues such as counter-piracy naval patrols off the coast of the Horn of Africa after 2008.⁶¹

The importance of securing sea lines of communication was thus a motivating factor in policymaking circles in Beijing, Delhi, Seoul, and Tokyo, but in each case the focus was on addressing threats to maritime shipping on the open seas. Japan and China opened military bases in Djibouti, in 2011 and 2017 respectively, while India signed an agreement with Oman to establish a logistical support facility for the Indian Navy at Duqm in 2018, and South Korea worked closely with U.S.- and European-led counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden off the Yemeni coastline.⁶² These initiatives resulted in an increase in the frequency and visibility of (primarily) naval activity in the broader region, but remained outside the Gulf and did not come close to approximating the network of U.S. bases and force deployments in the area.

Some diversification of defense and security relationships in Gulf states had been underway for more than a decade. The UAE led the way through agreements with Australia in 2008 and France in 2009 that saw the stationing of contingents of Australian and French forces at, respectively, Al-Minhad outside Dubai and three French military facilities in Abu Dhabi.⁶³ Security cooperation with South Korea intensified after the 2011 award of the contract to construct Abu Dhabi's four nuclear reactors to a Korean consortium was accompanied by a clause in the agreement committing South Korea to provide military support to the UAE if requested, likely through Korean special forces that have been training Emirati counterparts.⁶⁴ India and the UAE similarly set in motion a growing strategic alignment that focused initially on maritime security and naval cooperation that expanded in 2016 to encompass

⁵⁹ "Chinese Money is Behind Some of the Arab World's Biggest Projects," *The Economist*, April 20, 2019; Jonathan Fulton, "China Deepens Ties with UAE with Industrial Investment," *Al-Monitor*, July 10, 2019.

⁶⁰ Fulton, *China Deepens Ties*.

⁶¹ Neil Melvin, "The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region (background paper, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI] April 2019), 3-4, 7-8, and 10-12.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Rodger Shanahan, "Enduring Ties and Enduring Interests? Australia's Post-Afghanistan Strategic Choices in the Gulf" (policy brief, Lowy Institute for International Policy, August 2011), 4; "French Base Opened, Rafale Talks," *Gulf States Newsletter* 33, no. 854 (May 29, 2009): 7.

⁶⁴ "UAE/Oman: South Korea Considers Enhanced Military Cooperation," *Gulf States Newsletter* 44, no. 1095 (January 9, 2020): 8.

cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and civil nuclear cooperation.⁶⁵ The UAE and Qatar (separately) developed closer operational links with NATO as did Kuwait, which opened NATO's first Regional Center in the Gulf in 2017.⁶⁶

As yet, however, there has been no credible alternative collective security arrangement to the U.S.-led structures described earlier in this paper, but the progressive internationalization of Gulf political economies and the gradual disengagement of U.S. interest, if not force, may change this over time. Russia and Iran both proposed new regional security frameworks that provide options for future hedging and balancing among regional states should doubts about U.S. intentions persist and intensify. Russia unveiled its "Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Area" on July 23, 2019, which called for the removal of "extra-regional" foreign troops from the Gulf, the involvement of the United Nations and organizations such as the Arab League in multilateral tracks to resolve regional conflicts, and, longer-term, the creation of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷ Chinese support added geopolitical weight to the Russian proposal as a potential alternative, should concerns about what one analyst labeled "the reliability of the U.S. as the region's sole security guarantor" continue to rise.⁶⁸

The Iranian proposal for a "Hormuz Peace Endeavor," or HOPE, was presented in September 2019 by President Hasan Rouhani during the United Nations General Assembly and by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to a meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York.⁶⁹ The HOPE initiative set out a list of "subject-oriented" principles it believed could form the basis for building coalitions of common interest, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the peaceful settlement of disputes, arms control, energy security, and freedom of navigation. Like the Russian proposal, HOPE called for the active involvement of the United Nations in supporting a new regional security architecture, alongside the creation of a non-intervention and non-aggression pact by the states of the "Hormuz community," and for the introduction of confidence building measures to increase regionwide communication and dialogue.⁷⁰

Any search for an alternative security architecture in the Gulf is complicated by several factors. One is the incompatibility between the Iranian position on excluding "extra-regional" forces from regional security arrangements and the practical reality of the existing network of American partnerships with GCC states, notwithstanding the growing

⁶⁵ Lee Corder, "Progressing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review*, 64, no. 4 (2012): 71-73; "India, UAE Set to Ink Civil Nuclear & 15 Other Pacts during Crown Prince's Visit," *The Economic Times*, February 9, 2016.

⁶⁶ Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, "NATO and the Gulf: The New Regional Center in Kuwait" (online commentary, Istituto per Gli Studi di Politica Internazionale [ISPI], March 2, 2017).

⁶⁷ Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative," *Valdai Discussion Club*, August 6, 2019.

⁶⁸ James Dorsey, "Will There Be a New Russian-Chinese Security Architecture in the Gulf?" (perspectives paper no. 1287, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies [BESA Center], September 13, 2019).

⁶⁹ Mehran Haghiri and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?" *Atlantic Council*, October 3, 2019.

⁷⁰ Kayhan Barzegar, "Evaluating the Hormuz Peace Endeavor," *Lobe Log*, November 6, 2019.

doubts over U.S. reliability described above. Another is that for reasons of domestic politics, any leader, Iranian or American, would likely find it difficult to make (or even be seen to make) the first concessionary step toward dialogue or negotiation after the fallout from the JCPOA. A way of getting around these rigidities might be the addition (rather than removal) of participants in regional security, which is what both the Russian and the Iranian proposals moved toward. Over time, the “multilateralization” of the Gulf security architecture could potentially overcome the hitherto binary divisions between Iran and the U.S. and its partners over the function and role of external forces in the region.

Appeals for greater inclusivity and burden sharing might also address concerns expressed in regional capitals and by the Trump administration in recent years. Officials in most of the GCC states were angered by their exclusion from the negotiations between the international community (represented by the P5+1) and Iran that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, and are likely to demand greater involvement should talks on a “new” nuclear deal ever become a possibility.⁷¹ A new framework for negotiations that includes regional states would expand the range of stakeholders in the outcome of any eventual agreement and overcome the lack of local “buy-in” that undermined the JCPOA. Moreover, the newfound sense of realism in Saudi and Emirati policymaking could manifest in a more pragmatic approach to engaging with Iran—certainly by comparison to 2015 and the military intervention in Yemen just as the P5+1 negotiations they had been excluded from were nearing their climax.

Throughout his term in office, Trump has exhorted U.S. allies and partners alike to bear a greater proportion of burden sharing in meeting the costs of American deployments around the world. While much of the president’s ire has been directed toward NATO allies and South Korea, after the attacks on shipping in 2019 he focused on the notion that the U.S. was underwriting maritime and regional security in the Persian Gulf that other trading partners were “freeloading” on.⁷² After the second attacks on shipping in June 2019, a presidential tweet claimed that “China gets 91% of its Oil from the Straight [sic], Japan 62%, & many other countries likewise. So why are we protecting the shipping lanes for other countries (many years) for zero compensation?” The outgoing vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force General Paul Selva, provided more nuance when he suggested that “nations that benefit from the movement of oil through the Persian Gulf are bearing little or no responsibility for the economic benefit they gain from the movement of that oil.” Selva added that whereas the U.S. had benefited directly from protecting maritime shipping during the Iran-Iraq War because “we got a substantial amount of our oil from the Persian Gulf (...) the circumstances are very different now than they were in the 1980s.”⁷³ Some of the pieces that could serve as the building blocks for a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf may therefore be emerging, albeit in an uncoordinated, seemingly “ad hoc” manner, and lacking any real consensus on next steps. In the absence of any

⁷¹ “Gulf Regional Security” (workshop discussion, Doha Forum, Qatar, December 14, 2019).

⁷² Daniel DePetris, “The U.S. Protects the Global Commons. Others Can Police its Choke Points,” *Defense One*, July 9, 2019.

⁷³ David Larter, “Don’t Expect the U.S. to Secure Arabian Gulf Shipping Alone, a Top General Says,” *Defense News*, June 18, 2019.

overarching vision, a series of piecemeal initiatives may instead change by degrees the conception of security and its application in practice, with the late 2019 de-escalation in tension between Saudi and Houthi forces in Yemen a case in point.⁷⁴ The higher frequency of contact and dialogue, both direct and through intermediaries, since September 2019 may yet evolve into practicable confidence-building measures with an initial focus on less contentious issues such as the protection of maritime shipping or environmental security in Gulf waters, and, over time, expand into more sensitive areas such as military-to-military exchanges and policy coordination. A realistic objective for all regional actors would be identifying and implementing measures to overcome the legacy of years of mistrust as well as the zero-sum approach mentality that has taken root in certain quarters.

Looking further ahead, the steady diversification of economic and energy relationships will give a greater array of international partners a direct stake in regional stability in the Persian Gulf. Even if this translates only gradually into more visible involvement in security arrangements, it is unlikely that the nations expected to figure prominently in political and economic partnerships in the 2020s will “pick sides” to anything like the same extent the U.S. has done in the region since 1979. This, alone, may be expected to lead to a rebalancing as partner-states resist pressures to get involved in regional standoffs and instead opt to maintain broadly equitable (even if largely separate, at first) relations with all; an early example of this was a trilateral naval exercise conducted by Iran with Russia and China in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman in December 2019, which focused on anti-piracy and search-and-rescue operations.⁷⁵

Since the Soleimani killing, diplomacy in the Gulf has intensified with the Qatar and Omani foreign ministers as well as the emir of Qatar all traveling to Iran, and leaders in every capital, including Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, expressing the importance of de-escalating tension.⁷⁶ The restraining effect of the demonstration of Iranian threat and concern at the U.S. response has been palpable as regional leaders gear up for Dubai’s World Expo 2020 and Saudi Arabia’s G-20 Summit, and raises the possibility that future regional security arrangements might be based on more realistic balance of power projections. The trends that are gradually reshaping the international relations of the Persian Gulf did not begin with the Trump administration, but they may just have an outcome that is longer-lasting and more durable.

⁷⁴ Neil Partrick, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: Time for Them to Get Real?,” January 31, 2020, published online at <https://neilpartrick.com/blog/saudi-arabia-and-iran-time-for-them-to-get-real>, accessed online on February 4, 2020.

⁷⁵ Ben Westcott and Hamdi Alkhsali, “China, Russia and Iran Hold Joint Naval Drills in Gulf of Oman,” *CNN*, December 27, 2019.

⁷⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Realism and Restraint in the Persian Gulf,” *Responsible Statecraft*, January 30, 2020.