Gulf Security in a ‘Post-Free Riders’ World

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Executive Summary

◊ The discussion on Gulf-Asia relations rarely focuses beyond their expanding economic ties. Exploring the ‘what next’ dimension reveals attempts at ‘strategic’ cooperation that offer alternative possibilities for Gulf security.

◊ With the United States no longer dependent on the region’s oil and the economic power centre shifting from the West to the East over the last two decades, the Gulf and Asian countries – called ‘free riders’ – long-term interests are unlikely to remain dependent only on the United States for the security of their energy supply chain.

◊ The recent US administrations’ stress on ‘America First’ as a reaction to public opinion for an inward-looking policy, has also reduced Washington’s political-military interest and influence abroad.

◊ As a result, some Gulf countries are thinking out of the box, recalibrating their strategies and developing ‘omni-balancing’ security partnerships with influential Asian countries, without shutting the door on the United States. This diversifying or hedging strategy could serve as a backup plan against the possibility of further reduction of US involvement in the region.

◊ In a world that is increasingly shaping to be multipolar, this opens possibilities for other players, including China, India, Japan and Russia, to engage in a broader security cooperation approach in the Gulf. The Russian proposal for ‘collective security’ in the region is one such recent idea that is waiting on the table to be further explored.

◊ This Insight analyses these dynamics and points to the 2019 international vigil to protect oil shipping in the region’s waters as a precursor to the envisaged ‘collective’ security. It also argues that such a Gulf security architecture offers the Western countries, primarily the United States, a stage to remain relevant in the affairs of the region.

◊ Finally, the jury is still out on how a post-Covid-19 global order will pan out. While some pessimistic scenarios are doing the rounds, it is more likely that the direction of changes over the last two decades would continue. There are bound to be some variation in the momentum of change, but cooperation is likely to prevail over competition and confrontation. Keeping this and the pre-Covid-19 developments in the region in mind, this Insight recommends that:
  o the Gulf countries continue their foreign policy diversification process which enhances their strategic autonomy;
  o strengthen diplomatic options to settle regional divisions, especially with the help of Asian countries, which have equidistant ties with the principal adversaries in the Gulf;
  o use bilateral engagement with the United States, Russia, and major Asian and European powers to discuss and encourage exploring alternative security options in the region;
  o study the possibility of starting 3+3 bilateral talks since the interests of the ministries of economy, foreign affairs and defence are interlinked;
  o enhance the scope of ‘joint exercises’ with its growing number of strategic partners;
  o initiate Track II and/or Track 1.5 dialogues, with a long-term view of shaping cooperative security arrangements in the region;
  o critically assess, among others, the 2019 Russian collective security proposal; and
  o attempt to get on board the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
The Issue

The sharp US-Iran rhetoric and confrontation, which also involved attacks on some facilities in or near the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, during 2019 and early 2020, underlined the fraying West-centric security architecture in the Gulf region. It also highlighted the need to hasten the process of exploring alternative mechanisms to ensure peace and security in a region that is vitally linked to global economic and political interests. This brings to the fore Asian countries, many of which have witnessed a major shift in their economic might in recent decades, bearing the potential to alter the global political-security landscape, including in the Gulf region.

During the last two decades, ties between Asia’s biggest oil producers and consumers have grown exponentially. By feeding the energy demands of the Asian boom, the economies of the Gulf countries also grew rapidly. This oil-based ‘East-East camaraderie’ steadily expanded to boost non-oil trade and strategic cross-investments in diverse sectors. Consequently, the cumulative Gulf-Asia commercial transaction bill easily exceeded that between the Gulf and the European Union and United States combined.1

Moving forward, Gulf-Asia ties will continue to grow deeper roots in the energy domain, including renewables, while diversifying into the non-oil sector. Thus, long before the United States announced its strategic rebalancing policy of a ‘pivot’ to Asia, the GCC countries had set their eyes on Asia as a future ally. Though these ties were rooted primarily in transactional economic activities, they are slowly transforming to become agents capable of impacting geopolitics, with the possibility of an Asian-promoted ‘collective’ Gulf security architecture evolving in the future.

There have been increasing calls in recent years for the GCC countries to take stock of the situation, act independently and design future security arrangements, without leaving everything for the United States to formulate, thus opening a window for other countries. It is true that though the GCC’s ties with Asia are expanding, no other international actor can replace the United States in the short- or even medium-term future of the region. But that could change in the medium to long term.

It is important to note that while the GCC is no longer a homogenous bloc, all the members have individually expressed interest in exploring alternative security scenarios in the region.

This stems from the fact that the GCC countries are increasingly finding themselves in a fix, having to choose between their traditional security guarantor, the United States, and their disagreements with many aspects of US policy since the turn of the century. They are increasingly convinced that events in the Middle East are beyond the scope of just US influence, as is evident from the events in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya, among others. Developments related to Iran, in particular, have certainly not been in the best interests of the GCC countries. Consequently, two schools of thought prevail in the region: one urging less international involvement in the region’s affairs and the other, more, with a bigger role for the region.

Experts arguing that the way out of the dilemma is through the withdrawal of external powers from the Gulf feel that they have precipitated the crises rather than contributed positively. Therefore, the new mantra is that “a lasting Gulf security system can only function if it is based on a regional initiative”. But the situation on the ground, especially Saudi-Iran rivalry and the lack of any other non-US security arrangement, is really not conducive to the complete removal of external forces. Further, an indigenous alternative and viable security architecture is also highly unlikely.2

Internationalisation of the Region

In such a situation, the only option is further internationalisation of the region. Hence, the GCC countries are willing to consider intense political, economic, social and even security ties with other countries to counter the prevailing notion that only American military power counts. To institutionalise this exploration, the GCC countries, along with economic diversification, have also intensified foreign policy diversification.

At the 2004 Gulf Dialogue in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia’s then foreign minister Saud Al-Faisal said: “Guarantees for Gulf security cannot be provided unilaterally even by the only superpower in the world...The region requires guarantees provided by the collective will of the international community.”3

In 2016, the UAE’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Anwar Gargash, said: “In today’s world, the stability of the region cannot rest on American engagement alone. Other actors, including Russia, China, India and the European Union also have an important role to play, which is why our foreign policy seeks to consolidate relations with these actors.”4
After years of dissatisfaction with the Obama administration, the GCC countries’ ties with the United States have improved during President Donald Trump’s tenure. The US pullout from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the willingness to push back against Iran, have positively impacted their ties. The future course of these ties, however, is uncertain.

This uncertainty, along with the shift in the economic power centre from the West to the East, is encouraging the GCC countries to build ties with host of alternatives in Asia, including China, India, Japan and South Korea, among others, as well as Turkey and Russia. This phenomenon of ‘Easternisation’ – wherein Asia is technologically advanced and economically linked to all continents – has hurt the American and European abilities to influence the world like they did previously. It is still early days, but the exploration of alternatives was partly conditioned by Washington’s counsel to the contrary – on invading Iraq and the failure to limit the ensuing chaos, the response to the Arab Spring and the nuclear deal with Iran. These three instances compromised the GCC countries’ security concerns. The inaction in the Syrian war and the uncertainty after Washington walked out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 reinforced the region’s rationale to formalise alternatives.

As part of this experimental effort to explore regional solutions to regional problems, some Gulf countries have expanded their military capabilities and transformed themselves from being security recipients to becoming security providers. Further, from seeking mediation from outside powers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, served as mediators in international conflicts, like the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal in 2018.

The West’s Confusing Signals

The exploration of alternatives was partly conditioned by Washington’s insistence – despite the region’s counsel to the contrary – on invading Iraq and the failure to limit the ensuing chaos, the response to the Arab Spring and the nuclear deal with Iran. These three instances compromised the GCC countries’ security concerns. The inaction in the Syrian war and the uncertainty after Washington walked out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 reinforced the region’s rationale to formalise alternatives.

The above mentioned reasons not only conditioned the region’s fatigue about the United States, but also made apparent a sense of US fatigue with the region. President Obama’s State of the Union address in 2014 outlined the new policy – Washington would limit US military intervention in conflicts around the world, without neglecting global terrorism. This policy indirectly reflected the desire to focus on domestic issues over its international role.

At the heart of this policy was President Obama’s recognition of additional reasons for the US’s economic challenges after the 2008-2009 financial crisis – the George W. Bush administration’s Afghan and Iraqi misadventures. These “most expensive wars in US history”, estimated at about US$ 6 trillion, was seen as constraining US federal budgets. It is still early days, but the attempt is to build on the present conducive economic and political bonhomie to chart out a viable strategic security dimension to the relationship.

However, the United States is in no mood to relent. Washington has stressed that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the centre of the action”. Such assertions and growing economic and political competition between the United States and China, and their allies, throws up the possibility of intense competition over influence and discord over the long-term interests of the GCC countries. The targeted killing of Soleimani has also triggered a debate about Washington’s real strategy – was it Washington’s swansong or a fresh start to reclaim its preeminence?

Amid all these developments, the fact that the GCC countries are even willing to consider alternatives is the real ‘strategic’ shift occurring in the region. It is equally interesting to note that the GCC countries are proactively exploring indigenous options to achieve stability in the region even if they have not produced the intended results. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have been part of the political and military developments in Libya and Syria after the Arab Uprising in 2011, and thereafter in Yemen. These countries also played an important role in the joint war against Daesh, which had several Asian countries as partners.
wanting Washington to “concentrate more on national” than international problems.9

These sentiments and Obama’s recognition of the same were encapsulated in the 2014 statement: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail”.10 In addition, the Obama administration also viewed the GCC countries as “free riders”, who need to “share” the Middle East with Iran.11

In this milieu, Donald Trump’s campaign slogan of “America first,” which was a recalibrated version of the previous administration’s policy, and his election as president were viewed as signs that Washington would continue to look inwards. However, the Trump administration may have realised that diminishing global influence was also a reason for its economic difficulties. In order to reverse the slide, the Trump administration may have ramped up its activist role in many parts of the world, including the Middle East.

Despite its aggressive stance and action against Iran, the Trump administration appears to be looking inwards in the build-up to the 2020 presidential election. This was evident when Trump noted in June 2019 that China, Japan and South Korea receive huge supplies of energy resources from the Gulf region and openly questioned the US’s security role: “So why are we protecting the shipping lanes for other countries for zero compensation. All of these countries should be protecting their own ships…” 12

This may suggest, as Steve Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations has said, that “the United States is on its way out. Leaders in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, and Muscat understand what is happening. They have been worrying about the US commitment to their security for some time and...making overtures to China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey”.13

Asian Security Pitch

As the economic might of some of the principal Asian powers grows, their military influence is likely to intensify as well. Among the Asian contenders for a possible collective security role in the Gulf are China and India, with whom the GCC countries have robust diplomatic relations and the biggest economic stakes. The fact that both countries also have good relations with Iran means that Asia could play a more constructive part in the regional security dynamic than the United States.

China and India are bound to take part in any ‘post-free riders’ arrangement that safeguards their interests, thereby overlapping with the security requirements of the Gulf region. Some of the developments in, and statements of, both countries point to the possibility of an Asian role in the security architecture in the Gulf becoming more than rhetoric in the long term.

Further, in a bid to fill the evolving vacuum, Japan, Russia and Turkey are also proposing and assuming interesting positions. If the Gulf countries’ recent security initiatives are included in the mix, there are already indications of an evolving ‘collective’ mechanism in a multipolar world.

China’s Security Footprint

It is estimated that by 2025, the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca are likely to facilitate about 75% of China’s energy imports, which explains its massive aid and loan guarantees for building the ‘String of Pearls’. The surveillance stations, naval facilities and airstrips that Beijing is either building or contemplating to safeguard the oil route are aimed at reducing the vulnerability of its supplies to US power.

It also announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily in Eurasia, including the Middle East.14 In fact, Iran is a crucial element of the BRI. Though the BRI is primarily an economic tool and does not feature a ‘formal’ security footprint, the countries involved could use economic engagement to explore tentative Chinese involvement in managing the security affairs of the region in the future. This stems from the fact that Chinese companies and the government are bolstering security to protect their investments, projects and people along the BRI routes.15

China’s establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, aside the Bab-el-Mandeb – the key chokepoint connecting Asia and Europe – in 2017 would serve as a ‘laboratory’ to learn about using foreign military facilities to protect its citizens and commercial interests abroad. This might influence China’s plans for other overseas bases, including one in the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Its Marine Corps, which is already deployed in Djibouti, could also become its primary rapid response force in the BRI countries in the Indian Ocean littoral. In one of its first acknowledgments, a year after the Djibouti base was established, the Ministry of National Defence said that the new facility would help Beijing “better fulfil China’s international responsibilities, including anti-piracy work and maintaining peace and stability of Africa and the world”.16
Among other examples of China’s growing naval strength, three stand out. First, 31 Chinese naval fleets escorted 6,600 ships between 2008 and 2018 in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia. Of these, 3,400 or 51.5% were foreign vessels. Second, the Chinese navy had 328 ships in 2017, 350 ships in 2018, and is expected to soon reach 400. In comparison, the US fleet numbered 280 ships in early 2018 and is expected to decline due to budgetary constraints. Finally, foreseeing an important economic-early 2018 and is expected to decline due to budgetary constraints. Finally, foreseeing an important economic-

While these examples indicate that China is quite active in the region, the problem is that Beijing does not want to take sides in a region that expects a clear stance. In the current context, this is a prudent policy – one that was acknowledged even by President Obama. China is a “free rider...can’t the United States be a little bit more like China?”

Beijing has long espoused a policy of ‘non-interference’ in other countries’ internal affairs. It opposed the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and voted with Russia to block action to end President Bashar Al Assad’s rule in Syria. It did not take part in the coalition of 60-odd countries’ fighting Daesh, despite its oil interests in Iraq and reports of Chinese Muslims fighting there.

While Beijing has more personnel in the UN peacekeeping missions in Africa than any other permanent member of the Security Council, it is a reluctant actor in the Middle East. This is because it feels it still lacks the ‘ability’ to lead in resolving current regional conflicts.

However, China’s first ‘Arab Policy Paper’ in 2016 set out the country’s development strategies in the region and mirrored its readiness to cooperate towards a win-win situation. In short, it reiterated its political commitment to peace and stability in the Middle East.

Within a short span of releasing this paper, President Xi Jinping made his first tour of the Middle East since assuming office. By visiting Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, especially during the height of the Riyadh–Tehran feud, Beijing clearly demonstrated that the region is very much a part its strategic focus, perhaps extending beyond business interests.

Overall, an expanding BRI, rapid modernisation of security forces, development of naval capabilities and ports infrastructure, increasing arms exports, and the rising stock of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are indications of its evolving interest in being a global political and security actor, which could impact the developments in the Gulf.

India’s Neighbourhood Policy

While energy security is certainly a factor, India’s expanded security perspective is driven by necessity, ambition and opportunity. After Pakistan, China, Russia and the United States, the Gulf is its next priority, to ensure against any maritime or landward threat to it from the region, serve as a base to pursue India’s interests, confront terrorism and extremism, as well as tap the investment potential.

The security of the Gulf countries, as well as the wider Middle East, is of paramount concern and New Delhi is ready to contribute to the stability of the region by sharing its experience in combating terrorism, maritime security and military training. Since the late 1990s, New Delhi has urged looking beyond the immediate neighbourhood: “The Gulf region is a part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood.” Further, “the key focus in our external relations is ensuring the stability and security of the region, comprising the arc of nations from the Gulf to East Asia.”

As India’s economy grows, it is beginning to lean towards greater strategic realism. A key part of this programme is to transform the Indian navy from a ‘brown water’ coastal defence force to a formidable ‘blue water’ fleet. The navy’s aim is not just to patrol the seas but have the capacity to create and “deploy battalion-sized forces at various strategic points... [on] short notice, and disperse them quickly from the landing or dropping zone before any adequate enemy response”. The inference is that the expansion programme envisions possible intervention in countries in India’s “sphere of influence”.

Aware of the need for greater collective security cooperation in the region, the Indian navy is promoting the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium to enable sustained interaction among the naval chiefs of the countries belonging to the Indian Ocean rim. New Delhi obtained strategic naval access to Sabang port, Indonesia, in 2018. This increased India’s access to important ports abroad to four, with the others in Oman, Seychelles and Iran.

Since 2014, India has accelerated its neighbourhood outreach policy with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, and included Iran and Israel as well. In return, the UAE, for example, has made “a strategic commitment to help India’s rise as a regional player, the sort of language used in the past only for the United States.”
The Riyadh Declaration of 2010 and the Abu Dhabi Declaration of 2015 strategically elevated the partnership to the next (comprehensive) strategic level. The new India-UAE relations are framed in the 2017 ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ agreement. Going beyond the ‘bilateral’, the two countries have agreed to cooperate “in their shared maritime domain in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions,” where both have substantial interests in the energy, trade, investments, and human resources domains.

Expanding beyond the traditional areas of energy, trade and expatriates and tapping new opportunities in the defence and security realms, India and the UAE started joint naval exercises in 2019. This is set to be replicated with Saudi Arabia, starting in 2020. This takes forward the 2008 India-Oman and India-Qatar defence pacts. The agreement with Qatar, described as an agreement “just short of stationing (Indian) troops” in Qatar, “lays out a structure for joint maritime security and training as well as exchange of visits.”

Speaking at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore in 2018, Prime Minister Modi placed the ‘Indo-Pacific region’ – which stretches “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas” and includes the Gulf region – at the centre of India’s global engagement, both from economic and security perspectives. India, he pointed out, promotes collective security to ensure that the global transit routes remain peaceful and free for all.

India’s cooperation has intensified with some of the big powers too. Indian and Australian warships conducted joint exercises in the Bay of Bengal in early 2019, followed by an anti-submarine exercise with the US Navy near Diego Garcia. The Indian and French navies also announced plans in late 2019 to start coordinated patrols in the Indian Ocean Region.

But India, like China, also has its red lines, which was evident in an Indian statement after the pact with Qatar: “We will go to the rescue of Qatar if Qatar requires it, in whatever form it takes…(But) India will not station troops in any foreign country. We don’t want to fight other people’s wars in foreign countries.” And, New Delhi, like Beijing, has resisted taking sides, by maintaining strategic ties with both Iran and the GCC countries.

Although India has publicly stated its interest in the Gulf region’s sea lines of communication remaining open and flowing, it has no ambition to become a US-style ‘lone wolf’ protector of Gulf security. This would run counter to its longstanding policy of avoiding alliances or military groups, and refraining from foreign military deployments not mandated by the United Nations.

More broadly, India is loath to risk damaging its core interests in the region by seeking a conspicuously active or ambitious role.

India has underlined that its relations with the Gulf are rooted in four parameters: “non-prescriptive, non-intrusive, non-judgmental and not taking sides in intra-regional disputes”. This enables India to simultaneously have close relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This is reflected in its ‘Think West’ strategy:

“If the eastern front is building upon longstanding policy, the western one is relatively more recent conceptually, even if India has had a historical presence in the Gulf…(but) ‘Act East’ would be matched with ‘Think West’…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…This may be expected to be a major focus of Indian diplomacy.”

**Japan and South Korea**

Amid US-Iran tension in December 2019, Japan approved a controversial plan to send its naval troops to the Middle East to guarantee the safety of its oil tankers. Interestingly, despite being a US ally, Japan’s ships will not be part of any US-led coalition in the region’s waters, thus ensuring neutrality between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

Japan, which is in the midst of a major revision of its ‘pacifist’ defence guidelines, including buying new weaponry and upgrading existing arsenal, is also upping its diplomatic outreach. Though it did not yield any result, Japan sought to mediate in the regional conflict, involving the United States, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visiting Iran in June 2019 and its Arab competitors in January 2020.

Seoul too is now offering peacekeeping, restoration, anti-piracy and training missions. The UAE, for example, is availing some of these facilities. Since 2011, a battalion of about 130 South Korean Akh (brother) Unit soldiers have been taking turns every year to train their UAE counterparts. Further, South Korea’s exports of defence industry products to the UAE during the 2011-2016 period increased to US$31 billion.

**Russia and Turkey Look East Too**

In another far-reaching development, China joined Russia and Iran in their first ever trilateral naval exercise in December 2019. A few months earlier, China backed a Russian proposal to explore an alternate security system for the Gulf. The move came amid heightening Iran-US-Saudi tension, which resulted in attacks on oil vessels...
in the region's waters, shooting down of an American drone, attacks on Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia and tit-for-tat tanker seizures, leading to beefed up multilateral international military presence in the Gulf waters.

The Russian proposal prescribes creation of a “counter-terrorism coalition (of) all stakeholders”, including the Gulf states, Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and India, among others. It urges a “universal and comprehensive” security system that consolidates “the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions.”

More interestingly, some reports suggest that Iran is even contemplating providing “basing rights for Russia at its ports of Bandar Bushehr and Chabahar”, which requires a constitutional amendment. Russia’s underlying argument is that it pursues good ties with all the relevant parties. The same is the case with China, India, Japan and South Korea as well.

While Russia may have viewed this as an alternative to the US-centric security mechanism, China appeared to be approaching this as a multilateral approach by committing only non-combat forces. Some scholars viewed this as a “preference for a continued US lead in maintaining Gulf security”. This, Beijing feels, would allow it to remain neutral in the tension between the Gulf camps.

While the Gulf is already trapped in a Saudi-Iran conundrum, a new layer of tension has been added over the last decade following Turkey’s active interest in the region. With Turkey clearly siding with Qatar following the 2017 blockade, its ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have turned fractious. Turkey, which is increasingly moving away from Europe and looking East, opened a new military base in Qatar (and has played active roles in Syria and Libya that have countered American and Saudi-UAE moves), leading to accusations that it harbours a desire to reclaim the political and religious leadership of its erstwhile Ottoman Empire, especially in the Arab world.

These dynamics accentuated following Ankara attempt to make political capital out of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in Istanbul in 2018. Though Turkey is likely to curb Iran’s influence to some degree, which offers scope for potential cooperation with Saudi Arabia, possibly after a rapprochement with Qatar, its role is likely to complicate international relations in the Gulf. But its ambitions and actions as a regional military power are here to stay, which is a source of major concern for some of the GCC members.

Proactive Gulf

In the diversifying security scenario of a multipolar world, the Gulf countries have been proactive too. The Western Indian Ocean, which is home to the Suez Canal, Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf, is the new regional competitive theatre. Several Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Iran, are seeking to spread their geopolitical influence in a region that is at the crossroads between Eastern Africa, the Gulf and Southern Asia.

Amid Saudi-Iran friction, there is also intra-Gulf competition in three geostrategic spheres – commercial ports, military agreements and bases, and chokepoints. This has exposed intra-GCC competition with, for example, Somalia supporting Qatar in the 2017 Gulf rift and the Maldives siding against it.

The development of new ports and establishment of new special economic zones like Duqm in Oman and King Abdullah Economic City and NEOM in Saudi Arabia means competition to similar facilities that already exist in the region. The competition over military bases is even more intense. This includes Saudi Arabia’s interest in Djibouti; the UAE’s base in Assab, Eritrea, push for bases in Berbera, Somaliland, and military cooperation with Seychelles; and Iran’s inroads in Tanzania; and Turkey’s bases in Qatar and Somalia (and efforts in Sudan). These have served to keep the security scene buzzing with strategic moves.

Oman’s strategy of allowing all major stakeholders of the Indian Ocean – China, India, the United States, and the United Kingdom – to open ports, is a new trend. It indicates that the Gulf countries are seeking a new strategy of balancing their interests or promoting strategic autonomy or even hedging against abrupt changes.

Iran too has been actively showcasing its presence in the region’s waters. In cooperation with India, it launched in 2017 the first phase of a strategic port in Chabahar. This is aimed at a multi-modal trade corridor connecting India to Central Asia. India has won concessions from the United States to develop Chabahar Port, despite sanctions. Further, in late 2019, Iran was part of the joint naval exercises with Russia and China.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have showcased their bid to diversify their security options not just through strategic partnerships with countries other than the United States. They are also actively promoting acquisition of modern military equipment and boosting domestic defence industries, by partnering with global defence firms.
The UAE’s slow but sure transition from a ‘soft’ to ‘smart’ power though consistent and heavy defence spending, as well as military involvement in the regional quest for stability led former US defence secretary James Mattis designate it as the ‘Little Sparta’. In 2019, for example, the UAE declared that it was setting up a Defence and Security Development Fund, which will boost its weapons production sector, both for domestic use and for exports.

Another strategic initiative, a regional security entity to protect the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, was established in 2018 to boost cooperation between seven Asian and African countries. This grouping includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen and targets securing regional and global shipping interests.38

Finally, as the US Congress tightens rules on selling certain weapons (especially armed drones) to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, China and Russia have stepped in. The UAE and Saudi Arabia used Chinese drones in Yemen.39 The UAE and Saudi Arabia are also collaborating to produce a light attack aircraft.40

Further, following a period of tension, signs of a revised and recalibrated approach emerged in late 2019 when the UAE pulled out troops from Yemen and engaged with Iran’s maritime officials, the first such dialogue since 2013. Though the UAE government stressed that linking the two developments was a misinterpretation, these and the UAE’s humanitarian aid to Iran during the Covid–19 pandemic have eased tension in the region. The new approach emphasises ‘collective diplomacy’ over escalation of tension.41 It has also been widely reported that Iraq is trying to mediate and ease Saudi-Iran tension.42

**Conclusion**

Despite the global economic slowdown, energy issues are likely to both influence the long-term political economies of the GCC countries and shape global affairs in the coming decades. And, the crux of new Gulf-Asia diplomacy rests on promoting cooperation between oil exporters and importers. The common political and security concerns on both sides provide an ideal platform to engage in peace and stability initiatives.

This assessment is based on the following premises:

1. a mere buyer-seller or transaction-based Gulf-Asia relationship is unsustainable in the long term;
2. the GCC countries would take Asia seriously only if it is willing to be involved beyond trade;
3. diminishing US interest and influence in the region – as demonstrated by the ‘Pivot to Asia’ and ‘America First’ pronouncements – mandates the need to explore alternative scenarios for Gulf security, to protect the interests of both the producers and consumers;
4. growing military capabilities of Asian powers could be tapped as alternatives, as part of a larger collective security architecture that includes the United States, Russia and European powers; and
5. since many of the GCC’s principal partners in Asia are also strategic partners with Iran, they may be able to play a constructive role in any future attempt at Saudi-Iran rapprochement, thereby holding the possibility of contributing to peace and stability in the region.

The question, however, is if Asian-promoted collective security architecture would be successful in contributing to security, cooperation and growth instead of being mired in suspicion. Two issues are major stumbling blocks. First, the UAE-Saudi friction with Iran means that there is limited scope to take this process forward at present. Second, there is also inadequate Asian consensus towards realising this process due to India-Pakistan rivalry, India-China competition, Japan-South Korea tension and many of these countries’ reluctance to work with China.

To overcome these challenges, it would be worth continuously discussing these issues at a series of Track II or Track 1.5 meetings, first involving China, India, Japan, South Korea, and a few GCC countries. This could be expanded later to include more Gulf countries, Asian and European powers, as well as Russia and the United States. While the outcome is far from assured, continued exploration of such an idea at least reflects a ‘collective’ approach to Gulf security, which is the need of the hour.

The reluctance of the principal Asian powers to take the first step is comprehensible. They are being adventurous in inaction. They could be contemplating why they should invest in cleaning the mess that the West has created. Asian countries, especially China and India, still have plenty of domestic issues to address. Given their vast population, they are still a long way from achieving prosperity across the board, which is key to their political stability. The global economic slowdown is also likely to encourage conservatism over adventurism. They have also learnt from America’s ‘misadventures’ in the region.

In such a milieu, the assertion that Asia countries could play a positive role in addressing the Gulf quagmire stems from the following factors:
1. Asia’s economic success could be influenced by how the Gulf tension pans out;

2. there is no military solution to the GCC-Iran row, with or without the United States, and diplomacy is the only way forward;

3. the United States cannot broker any GCC-Iran rapprochement bid; and

4. finally, Asia’s economic stakes with both parties and its expanding political-security imprint in the region makes it a better facilitator of peace between the two Gulf opponents.

The need and possibility of wider involvement in Gulf affairs has received support from American experts too. Former diplomat Chas Freeman has said that “without coordination between the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, India, and Muslim allies (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran),” no strategy can be effective in the Middle East. 43

Another retired diplomat Thomas Pickering has pointed out that Washington’s support for one of the warring Gulf actors means an amicable solution will remain elusive.44

Given this rationale, Asia could be part of any future peace initiative in the region in at least two ways. First, by becoming part of the region’s security architecture it could help create a level playing field and contribute to easing tension between the principal adversaries in the Gulf. This would also add muscle to its diplomatic channels to mediate as an honest peace broker.

Second, after arch-rivals India and Pakistan became members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran and one or two GCC countries – Saudi Arabia and/ or the UAE – could be the next members. This could add teeth to diplomacy and peace in the region.

Finally, it is crucial to note that in the current scenario, “a traditional, realist, balance of power concept is outdated because the nature of the competition...is not direct... Winners and losers in this rivalry will be determined more by coalitional and hybrid warfare capabilities.” Thus, “collective security and regional stability should be the endgames”.45

The changing dynamics were evident in the 2019 international vigil to protect oil shipping in the region’s waters. In addition to some of the GCC countries, India, China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Britain, among others, deployed ships either as blocs or individually to protect their interests, which could be a precursor to the envisaged collective security in a multipolar world.

This, however, does not suggest that it is the end of the road for Washington in the region’s security scenario. On the contrary, the GCC countries would feel more secure if new security arrangements include the United States rather than being under the umbrella of other powers, which maintain good ties with Iran. The better long-term alternative for the Gulf might, therefore, be a collective security architecture led by Asia, which has greater economic-security interests in the region, but also includes the United States, Russia and some European powers.

Finally, the jury is still out on how a post-Covid-19 global order will pan out. While some pessimistic scenarios are doing the rounds, it is more likely that the direction of changes over the last two decades would continue. There are bound to be some variation in the momentum of change, but cooperation is likely to prevail over competition and confrontation. Keeping this and the pre-Covid-19 developments in the region in mind, this Insight recommends that:

- the Gulf countries continue their foreign policy diversification process which enhances their strategic autonomy;
- strengthen diplomatic options to settle regional divisions, especially with the help of Asian countries, which have equidistant ties with the principal adversaries in the Gulf;
- use bilateral engagement with the United States, Russia, and major Asian and European powers to discuss and encourage exploring alternative security options in the region;
- study the possibility of starting 3+3 bilateral talks since the interests of the ministries of economy, foreign affairs and defence are interlinked;
- enhance the scope of ‘joint exercises’ with its growing number of strategic partners;
- initiate Track II and/or Track 1.5 dialogues, with a long-term view of shaping cooperative security arrangements in the region;
- critically assess the 2019 Russian collective security proposal; and
- attempt to get on board the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, at least as an observer.
Endnotes

5. Gideon Rachman, Easternization: Asia’s Rise and America’s Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond (Other Press, New York, 2016).
21. “Uighur IS fighters vow blood will ‘flow in rivers’ in China,” Reuters, 1 March 2017; and “China envoy says no accurate figure on Uighurs fighting in Syria,” Reuters, 20 August 2018.
22. Details of the policy paper are available at China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml
27. “Prime Minister Narenra Modi’s keynote address at Shangri La Dialogue,” Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1 June 2018.
34. Russia’s proximity to Iran and differences with the United States is a major source of concern for some of the GCC countries and their reluctance to consider Moscow’s proposal seriously.


41. “UAE seeks no confrontation with Iran but can’t accept its regional policy,” Gulf News, 10 November 2019.


