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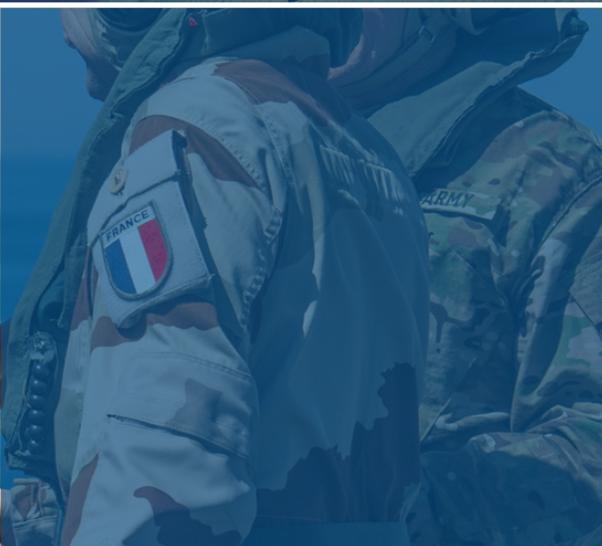
BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER  
ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY



# AFTER HUB-AND-SPOKE

US HEGEMONY IN A NEW GULF SECURITY ORDER

Bilal Y. Saab



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Cover photos: a US sailor aboard a US aircraft carrier in the Gulf, November 2011 (US Navy/Flickr); a royal Air Force plane flies over the Dubai desert in 2008 (Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom); US and French officers meet on French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* in the Gulf, March 2015 (US Navy/Flickr).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ever since Great Britain withdrew most of its military forces from the Gulf in the early 1970s, the United States has been the principal guarantor of security in the region. In the aftermath of the Cold War, no country dared to challenge America's preeminent position and role of hegemonic stabilizer in that part of the world. And since the successful completion of Operation Desert Storm and the end of the 1990-91 Gulf War, the United States has effectively monopolized Gulf security, protecting collective interests while enjoying special political relationships with the region's governments, as well as considerable economic benefits through massive arms sales.

Yet this era of Pax Americana in the Gulf, and perhaps in the broader Middle East, is changing, and some would say, may be nearing its end. Regional transformation and chaos resulting from the Arab uprisings, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and its global terrorist reach, shifting US priorities around the world, and the rise of other outside powers in the Gulf have all contributed to an acceleration of the transition from a Gulf security architecture with almost exclusive US access and control to a more penetrated system in which the United States is still militarily dominant, but major powers like Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France are more confidently stepping in, pursuing their self-interests, and assuming more expansive political, economic, and security roles that either compete with or complement US policies and interests.

This process of change in the Gulf should not be overstated—the United States is still the most central and relevant power in the area—but to ignore or dismiss the process altogether, especially as it appears to be on an upward trajectory, also would be harmful to the United States' long-term goals and interests in the region. The main questions that should be of concern to US strategic planners for the foreseeable future are how these new trends and dynamics in the Gulf will continue to impact US interests, and what the United States can and should do to minimize the risks and leverage the benefits.

This new strategic context in the Gulf presents an opportunity, but also a wake-up call, for the United States to review its decreasingly effective Gulf security approach. Despite Washington's

forward deployment and stationing of relatively large numbers of state-of-the-art air, land, and naval assets since the early 1990s, Gulf security, facing an array of complex and non-traditional threats, is still at risk. This discrepancy, and the fact that Washington has had to provide security reassurances regularly to its Gulf partners, arguably with reduced success and a great deal of difficulty and frustration, suggest a reassessment of overall US strategy for Gulf security.

A reasonable case can be made that the United States cannot continue to help ensure Gulf security alone as effectively and efficiently as it did in the past, especially as it contemplates drawing down in years ahead. The United States' investment in closer consultation and collaboration with French and British allies who have recently formulated serious plans to amplify their political-military presence in the region represents smart and sound strategy for the present and the future. Indeed, the US promotion and operationalization of real burden-sharing by capable and longstanding allies such as the United Kingdom (UK) and France, paired with a strategic dialogue with major adversaries such as Russia and China, offers a more sustainable US Gulf security strategy than the one Washington has pursued unilaterally over the past few decades.

It is especially important to affirm that any new, multilateral security arrangement in the Gulf must, first and foremost, be communicated to and developed with the Arab Gulf States themselves. The last thing the United States and its allies need is even the perception of outside powers strategizing and making plans about the security of the region, without the direct input and involvement of regional stakeholders themselves.

Similar to the P5+1 diplomatic construct that was used for the Iran nuclear talks, a P3+1 model, comprising the United States, the UK, and France as three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and a Gulf party, would be a helpful framework to consider for Gulf security. That begs the question: Would the Gulf side be represented by a single, leading state or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole? If the Gulf side does express interest in this new security forum, only they can determine the issue of Gulf participation. The benefits of GCC-wide involvement to the United States, Gulf security, and the Arab Gulf States

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themselves are obvious, and the problems with one individual Gulf country attempting to speak for the rest—assuming that is even feasible or realistic—are, too. Unfortunately, multilateralism within the GCC, while very much desirable and advantageous in this increasingly unsafe and resource-starved regional environment, is a myth. Numerous activities that the United States has wanted to pursue in the Gulf for the sake of collective interests—be it in capacity building or general deterrence—have been frustrated because of tensions, divisions, and objective differences among the Arab Gulf States.

If a US-led quadrilateral security forum can help encourage the development of a truly multilateral GCC, it would be a net gain for all sides. However, if that proves to be too difficult to achieve and continues to be hampered by the same problems that have dogged GCC multilateralism for years, then the scenario of an individual Gulf state representing its neighbors is an option, although one with many faults and little chance of materializing. After all, if Gulf history is any guide, the main reason why GCC multilateralism has not happened yet is precisely because of fears of domination by any one state—most notably by Saudi Arabia—over the others. So the thought of all Gulf governments sanctioning Riyadh to speak for the group, or perhaps the majority of the group (since Oman is almost always in its own league and Qatar is pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy), is farfetched, although it cannot be ruled out, especially with the rise of a younger and more assertive Saudi Arabia, which is interested in assuming a leadership role—a possibility that some other Gulf states might find more acceptable now.

This new Gulf security forum would preferably have a headquarters in the region to discuss political-military affairs. However, if establishing a headquarters is too problematic a goal, meetings could happen on a rotational basis. For example, instead of setting up such a facility in Riyadh, then perhaps US, British, and French officials would meet with their Gulf counterparts at a different location every time. This, too, is a decision that would have to be made jointly with Gulf partners to avoid any unnecessary political faux pas and promote the spirit of collaboration.

Logistics aside, the areas in which the UK and France can be most helpful and more effectively share the burden are political-cultural dialogue, capacity building, training, counterterrorism, joint military exercises, and defense industrial modernization. These activities have been happening already, but

on a bilateral basis, which has typically been the preferred format in the Gulf. So the idea is to switch to a more collective or multilateral model for the sake of effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Ideally, instead of the United States, the UK, and France separately working on these issues with Gulf partners, a serious attempt to organize and integrate—where it makes sense, of course—would be made. For example, Washington would include its British and French allies in the conceptualization and implementation of the agendas of future GCC summits. Specifically, the working groups that came out of the US-GCC Camp David Summit in May 2015 would have to be updated to make room for British and French input and operationalization.

The sight of American, British, and French militaries periodically conducting joint exercises and training with Arab Gulf militaries theoretically provides more robust security reassurances to Gulf partners, and equally important, boosts conventional deterrence against present and future adversaries, including a bolder, post-sanctions Iran. Moreover, in a strategic environment increasingly defined by more complex and less traditional threats, the United States could lean on its British and French allies and think together about more effective and efficient ways to address Iran's successful asymmetric warfare, and the threats posed by terrorist organizations, including ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Yet perhaps the most important conversation with British and French allies from which the United States could really benefit is on the issue of governance in the region. No amount of collective action by outside powers can, on its own, preserve Gulf security without Gulf governments committing to the process of political and economic reform. Here, there is very little outsiders can do to help. But given their extensive experiences in the region, the British and the French are uniquely positioned to offer advice to the United States on how to better cultivate and manage relationships with the Arab Gulf States and help steer the process of good governance in the right direction. Furthermore, should the United States, the UK, and France speak with one voice on the subject of reform to their Gulf interlocutors, it would underscore the primacy of the issue and show that it is not only a US, but a mutual concern, which hopefully would further incentivize Gulf partners to hasten the reform process.

The UK and France have deliberately put themselves in a position to get more involved in the security and politics of the Gulf. Yet, as promising

as increased British and French contributions to Gulf security can be, a big, potential challenge presents itself: how long can the UK and France actually share the burden before other priorities in their more immediate environment—e.g., European security—take precedence? To what extent does the future of NATO affect British and French national objectives, plans, and capabilities? It is likely that a strengthened NATO could free the UK and France up to augment their security engagement in the region. However, NATO revitalization is definitely not a foregone conclusion. Russia's military revanchism has drastically altered Europe's security landscape, from Ukraine to Syria on NATO's southern flank. Additionally, Europe is fighting a "rot from within" caused by the rise of political fringe movements, the European Union (EU) is facing internal challenges (e.g., Brexit, Grexit), reduced defense spending, and a major refugee crisis. These are real problems that could constrain British and French overseas posture, but the United States faces similar political and economic challenges at home, all of which reinforce the goal of cost-effective multilateralism in Gulf security.

Russia and China are most likely to raise objections and express concerns about increased US-UK-French cooperation and collaboration in the region, but Washington, London, and Paris can make an effort to clarify to Beijing and Moscow that this US-led arrangement would not be in opposition to their strategic interests. It is worth emphasizing that Russia and China do not dispute that the United States has a key role in Gulf security and the Middle East more broadly, and they have incentives to preserve and work within US hegemony in the short and medium term; however, they do, and will continue to, resist their deliberate exclusion. Russia's intervention in Syria is the latest example.

Gulf security is increasingly becoming a crowded geopolitical space, and this has both positive and negative aspects. It is good because it encourages (and even pressures) the United States to think more strategically about its long-term interests in the region, and it creates opportunities for Washington to finally get serious about burden-sharing and involve its closest and most capable allies in policing the world's most important East-West highway. It is bad because strategic adversaries such as Russia and China have smartly exploited the United States' declining fortunes and

are encroaching on its autonomy and sphere of influence in the Gulf. The Gulf, as one author once nicely described the East Asian order, "appears as 'ripe for multilateralism' as it appears 'ripe for rivalry'."<sup>1</sup> This new strategic environment in the Gulf heralds a future Gulf security order that surpasses the logic of a US-controlled hub-and-spoke.

None of this suggests that US hegemony in the Gulf is passé, or that the United States is less pivotal to the region's major security and political affairs. The United States' physical presence in the Gulf will remain a critical component of Gulf security for years to come. No major, external political outcomes happen in the Gulf without the blessing of the United States, and no major conventional war is likely to take place, as long as the United States is forward deployed in the region and credibly committed to its security. Yet today's threats are no longer tank formations crossing borders and mad dictators bent on territorial conquest. Present and future battles will be fought in the shadows and in the realm of ideas, especially in the Middle East.

To be most effective and efficient in its regional pursuits and to gradually reduce its obligations in the Middle East, without risking a drastic deterioration in security and an uptick in conflict, the United States would be wise to seek partnership with its closest, oldest, and most capable allies. Greater multilateralism in Gulf security would come with costs for Washington, including a reduction in US policy autonomy. Giving up security bilateralism also would challenge the exclusive access and relationships that the United States has maintained with Gulf governments. However, it should prove an acceptable price to pay and a worthy investment that would help secure longer-term US and collective interests in the region. Furthermore, the United States' commanding power would still shape the policies of its British and French allies, and set the agenda in a new multilateral Gulf security framework. If free-riding is a US concern and a source of frustration for Washington regarding both its allies and adversaries, then maybe it is time to closely examine the concept of burden-sharing and turn it into a reality in one of the world's most vital regions.

<sup>1</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "American Hegemony and East Asian Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 58, no. 3, p. 353, September 2004.

# INTRODUCTION

Ever since Great Britain withdrew most of its military forces from the Gulf in the early 1970s, the United States has been the principal guarantor of security in the region. In the aftermath of the Cold War, no country dared to challenge America’s preeminent position and role of hegemonic stabilizer in that part of the world. And since the successful completion of Operation Desert Storm and the end of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the United States has effectively monopolized Gulf security, protecting collective interests while enjoying special political relationships with the region’s governments, as well as considerable economic benefits through massive arms sales.

Yet this era of Pax Americana in the Gulf, and perhaps in the broader Middle East, is changing, and some would say, may be nearing its end. Regional transformation and chaos resulting from the Arab uprisings, the rise of ISIS and its global terrorist reach, shifting US priorities around the world, and the rise of other outside powers in the Gulf have contributed to an acceleration of the transition from a Gulf security architecture with almost exclusive US access and control to a more penetrated system in which the United States is still militarily dominant, but major powers like Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France are more confidently stepping in, pursuing their self-interests, and assuming more expansive political, economic, and security roles that either compete with or complement US policies and interests.

This process of change in the Gulf should not be overstated—the United States is still the most central and relevant power in the area—but to ignore or dismiss the process altogether, especially as it appears to be on an upward trajectory, also would be harmful to the United States’ long-term goals and interests in the region. The main questions that should be of concern to US strategic planners for

the foreseeable future are how these new trends and dynamics in the Gulf will continue to impact US interests, and what the United States can and should do to minimize the risks and leverage the benefits.

This new strategic context in the Gulf presents an opportunity, but also a wake-up call, for the United States to review its decreasingly effective Gulf security approach. Despite Washington’s forward deployment and stationing of relatively large numbers of state-of-the-art air, land, and naval assets since the early 1990s that could deter and defeat major traditional threats to the region, Gulf security, facing an array of complex and non-traditional threats, is still at risk. This discrepancy, and the fact that Washington has had to provide security reassurances regularly to its Gulf partners, arguably with reduced success and a great deal of difficulty and frustration, suggests a reassessment of overall US strategy for Gulf security.

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I have co-argued in some length and detail elsewhere that the United States can help preserve Gulf security and its key interests there by strengthening its partnerships with willing Arab Gulf states and making important adjustments to its defense strategy and posture.<sup>2</sup>

Gulf security also would benefit from more capable and stable regional partners who could assume greater self-defense responsibilities, make positive contributions to regional security, and gradually reduce their dependence on the United States. In this article, I explore a third and complementary track that also could add considerably to Gulf security: the management by the United States of the de-facto process of increasing internationalization

<sup>2</sup> Bilal Y. Saab and Barry Pavel, *Artful Balance: Future US Defense Strategy and Force Posture in the Gulf*, Atlantic Council, March 2015.



Capt. Andy Elvin addresses a group of multinational servicemen and women aboard the USS Ponce in Bahrain during the International Mine Countermeasures Exercise in 2013. (IMCMEX). *Photo credit: US Navy/Flickr.*

of Gulf security. My hypothesis is that the US promotion and operationalization of real burden-sharing by capable and longstanding allies, such as the United Kingdom and France, paired with a strategic dialogue with major adversaries, such as Russia and China, offers a more sustainable US Gulf security strategy than the one Washington has pursued unilaterally over the past few decades.

To be clear, this proposed US approach is no panacea and offers no guarantees for lasting order in the region. No matter what strategies foreign powers adopt, stability and security in the Gulf and elsewhere will always be a direct result of the internal and external policies and behaviors of the region's states themselves. But a reasonable case can be made that the United States cannot continue to help ensure Gulf security alone as effectively and efficiently as it did in the past, especially as it contemplates, or if it wishes to preserve the option of, drawing down in years ahead. The United States' investment in closer consultation and collaboration with French and British allies who have recently formulated serious plans to amplify their political-military presence in the region, represents smart and sound strategy for the present and the future.

The United States stands to gain from gradually advancing the transition from a US-controlled

hub-and-spoke security system in the Gulf to a US-led alliance network that initially would involve the UK and France, but could expand to include other Western allies who are devoting increased attention to, and broadening their involvement in, Gulf security. This does not mean that the United States would have to sacrifice its position in the region for the sake of abstract and lofty notions of multilateralism, or sanction its own developing detachment by inviting other powers, friends or foes, to challenge its relative position. On the contrary, the United States has a better shot at sustainably protecting collective interests and securing the Gulf by strategizing and working more closely with its British and French allies, and by pragmatically engaging its adversaries Russia and China on Gulf security.

For the United States, turning back the clock to the days of unchallenged dominance in the Gulf, or reversing regional and global trends, is neither possible (at least not at an acceptable cost) nor desirable. There is ample value, instead, in embracing and organizing the process of internationalization of Gulf security in ways that preserve US influence and key interests now, and into the future.

## PAX AMERICANA

The concept of a post-American Middle East, born partly out of perceptions of a gradual US retreat from the region, recently has elicited a vigorous debate among foreign policy communities in Washington and Gulf capitals. In the public domain, these discussions also have featured an unhealthy amount of sensationalist and vituperative commentary, based on misunderstanding and confusion regarding the goals and intentions of the United States and Gulf countries toward collective interests. Separating the noise from the substantive issues that have profoundly challenged the relationship has become a crucial exercise for the United States and its Gulf partners. More specifically, understanding how historical trends and an ever changing strategic context in the region and across the globe have had a real impact on policy planning for both sides is key.

Very few would maintain that it is business as usual between the United States and its traditional partners in the Middle East. Yet, how much have

things changed and what this all means for mutual interests and the future of the region, is still very much unclear, requiring honest examination, away from heated political rhetoric and social media frenzy. A calm conversation, preferably on bilateral or multilateral levels, about the real and perceived gap that has emerged between the United States and its Gulf partners since 2011—and equally important, how it can be reduced—is greatly needed.

One vital area in the Middle East where myths and facts about US security commitments seem to have collided is the Gulf region. Aside from poisoning the political atmosphere and hampering the strategic dialogue, conspiracy theories about Washington’s desire to totally pull back from the area and abandon its friends have obscured the objective reality of a Gulf security order changing before our eyes and moving away from restricted US supervision. The more fascinating part about this trend is that it has had little to do, at least directly, with the United States, its intentions, or its capabilities in the Gulf.

## BURDEN-SHARING WITH ALLIES

Since the Cold War, the United States has been encouraging and sometimes even pressuring its NATO allies, both privately and publicly, to contribute more tangibly to the well-being of the Alliance, and specifically share the burden of safeguarding collective interests, confronting foes, addressing threats, and securing various hot spots around the world. The United States’ complaint about its allies “free-riding” has not abated. On the contrary, it seems to have grown on balance, with President Barack Obama lately using the term to call out US Middle Eastern partners and European allies for allegedly abusing US military power and shirking their responsibilities for the collective good.<sup>3</sup> While there is a lot to agree with in the US position, it is incomplete.

Since NATO’s formation, allies have increasingly relied on the United States to protect the transatlantic space. Over the years, they even

have adopted measures and policies leading to the reduction of their security roles in the Alliance, due to political and economic constraints at home, which preclude higher defense spending. Much of this is perfectly understandable. The United States is, after all, the most powerful nation on earth and its global political influence and military capabilities are unmatched. Therefore, it is only natural for allies to depend on the United States to do the heavy lifting. Yet, while allies may have exploited US power and largesse, the United States also shares the blame for this imbalance by failing to push more effectively for “the burden-sharing enterprise” and neglecting to identify clear mechanisms for increased allied cooperation.

More profoundly, though, while burden-sharing is a desired goal that has been reiterated by successive US administrations, the United States has not truly internalized the concept and embraced it as a real operating principle in its foreign and defense policy. This is normal. Independence in alliance arrangements and more generally in international relations—a powerful weapon to have in this

<sup>3</sup> Mark Landler, “Obama Criticizes the ‘Free Riders’ Among America’s Allies,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/world/middleeast/obama-criticizes-the-free-riders-among-americas-allies.html>.

dangerous world—is not easy to give up, given its real benefits, including flexibility and control over strategy and decision-making processes in any given conflict or crisis. Going it alone also means that you reap all the fruits of your labor, without having to share “the spoils of war” with underachieving allies. Last but not least, there is a supply issue. The United States has often hesitated to work more closely with its allies, because it either does not trust their capabilities or questions their political resolve.

However, be it in the Middle East, Asia, or wherever the United States is a principal regional power, the United States no longer has the luxury of complete autonomy, due to new fiscal realities, new priorities, and a new international environment that has become more challenging, complex, and interconnected. In the Middle East, and particularly in the Gulf, where US influence is waning, the United States has a historic opportunity to test the idea of burden-sharing and turn it into reality, by working with two allied nations that bring a ton to the table: the United Kingdom and France. Not only do the British and the French have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the region than the United States and have more experience (good and bad) in that part of the world due to their colonial pasts, but equally important, they have shown a renewed interest in, and increased commitment to, regional security due to various perceived threats and opportunities. It is up to the United States to take advantage of this new reality.

## THE UNITED KINGDOM

The powerful symbolism of the UK’s return to the Kingdom of Bahrain is hard to miss. Indeed, far more significant than the location of the new British military base at Mina Salman in Manama is the profound reality of the former colonial power reestablishing its permanent physical presence in the region, since its decision to leave in 1968. It is not difficult to understand why British forces are once again deployed east of the Suez Canal. British officials are increasingly concerned about energy security, trade, and terrorism in, and from, the region.

To address these issues effectively and renew its security commitment to the Gulf, London believes,

as it made clear in its National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015,<sup>4</sup> that a physical presence there has become necessary. It is certainly a remarkable development, given that Washington’s huge military presence in the Gulf itself has had mixed results; however, London is determined and moving forward with its plans. With the building of the base, British officials also are keen to signal to their American counterparts—but also to adversaries, such as Iran and Russia—their seriousness about assuming more assertive security responsibilities in NATO, and specifically taking a greater share of the burden of securing the Gulf and other parts of the Middle East.

Perhaps no one could have better explained why the UK is increasing its involvement in, and broadening its partnerships with, the Gulf than British Foreign Office Minister Lord Howell. In eloquent remarks delivered on June 20, 2012, at the Gulf Cooperation Council and the City Conference, he said: “The region is growing in confidence on the international stage; becoming a network with an increasingly influential voice.” Boldly, he added: “America is learning that it no longer calls all the shots. We should take advantage of this growing confidence and work with the GCC region – through government; business; civil society; through all channels – to respect and support its development; and by extension, our own prosperity and security.”<sup>5</sup>

“America is learning that it no longer calls all the shots. We should . . . work with the GCC region . . . to respect and support its development; and by extension, our own prosperity and security.”

Although the UK has dramatically reduced its reliance on Middle Eastern crude oil over the years, there is no escaping the conundrum of interdependence and the global pricing of oil, which is affected by events in the Middle East, the world’s biggest oil exporter. Simply put, the region’s stability matters a great deal to Western and British economic security, even though only 1 percent of British petroleum imports currently come from the region.

4 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, November 2015, p. 55 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/478933/52309\\_Cm\\_9161\\_NSS\\_SDRReview\\_web\\_only.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SDRReview_web_only.pdf).

5 Speech, Foreign Office Minister Lord Howell, *UK Relations with the GCC Region: A Broadening Partnership*, June 20, 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-relations-with-the-gcc-region-a-broadening-partnership>.

Overall trade between the UK and the GCC considerably lags behind China and the United States, which is a source of frustration for British officials. Domestic politics, bureaucracy, and human rights concerns over Gulf government practices provide most of the explanation for the relatively low numbers. However, things look more promising in the area of business investments. In infrastructure alone there are plans to invest an estimated \$2 trillion over the next decade,<sup>6</sup> with the London skyline being one example of a major Gulf, and particularly Qatari, investment in the UK. Then, of course, there is the massive arms trade with Gulf countries and a burgeoning industry of joint defense ventures with British firms. Despite falling oil prices, countries such as Saudi Arabia have bought an increasing supply of weapons from British defense companies this year, according to UK Minister of State for Defense Procurement Philip Dunne.<sup>7</sup>

The new naval base in Mina Salman, which will be able to “accommodate the latest Type 45 destroyers and two new aircraft carriers when they enter service towards the end of the decade,” will allow London to work much more closely with Gulf governments on security and counterterrorism, (the Royal Air Force also operates a Typhoon fighter-jet squadron from Al-Minhad in Dubai, a base that has acted as a logistical bridge for operations in Afghanistan).<sup>8</sup> BBC News reported earlier this month that “at least 700 people from the UK have travelled to support or fight for jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq, according to British police. About half have since returned home. Most of those who went to the conflict zone are thought to have joined [the Islamic State].”<sup>9</sup> So long as violent extremism both at home and emanating from the Middle East continues to pose a threat to British society, London will continue to strengthen its partnerships with Gulf governments on intelligence and counterterrorism.

## FRANCE

France is another major, ex-colonial power in the Middle East with old and extensive political, economic, security, and cultural engagements with regional governments and societies. Paris’ rationale for upping its involvement in the region in recent years is very much similar to that of London. Like the UK, France seeks to revive its previous status as a global power and show that it can be a capable ally of the United States. It sees strategic opportunity in enhanced economic ties with the Gulf, but also high and immediate necessity, following the recent attacks in Paris, in defense and security cooperation to address a range of concerns including terrorism perpetrated by ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other jihadist organizations; the chaos in Libya; the challenge of Iran; and the refugee crisis in Europe, caused by the Syrian conflict.

Although France’s more significant regional military presence lies in Djibouti, a former French colony, the country does operate air, naval, army, and intelligence facilities in the Gulf, and specifically in the UAE.<sup>10</sup> In Abu Dhabi, Al Dhafra air base accommodates French Mirage and Rafale jets (in addition to UAE and US fighter planes), while the port of Mina Zayed handles French naval vessels and hosts French army units specializing in urban combat training. Roughly five hundred French military personnel are permanently stationed at the sites. The “Camp de la Paix” (Peace Camp) base is “the first foreign military installation built by France for fifty years and its first ever outside French or African soil.”<sup>11</sup>

The arms trade, defense industrial collaboration, and joint exercises between France and Gulf countries have continued to increase and mature in recent years. Amid a surge in its defense technology exports, France has secured hefty contracts with the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia for major equipment, such as Rafale jets and utility helicopters.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, France signed \$12 billion in contracts with Saudi Arabia alone. It also sold Qatar twenty-four Rafale jets and other military

6 Ibid.

7 Peggy Hollinger and Simeon Kerr, “Britain considers stronger military co-operation with Gulf,” *Financial Times*, November 8, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ac154eb6-863a-11e5-9f8c-a8d619fa707c.html>.

8 “We’re Back: A new naval base in Bahrain is an echo of the past,” *Economist*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/bahrain/21636071-new-naval-base-bahrain-echo-past-were-back>.

9 “Who are Britain’s jihadists?” *BBC News*, February 5, 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985>.

10 Matthew Saltmarsh, “France Opens Its First Military Bases in the Gulf,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2009 [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/world/europe/27france.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/world/europe/27france.html?_r=0).

11 Angelique Chrisafis, “France opens military base in UAE despite Iranian concerns,” *Guardian*, May 26, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/26/france-military-base-uae>.

12 Torie Rose DeGhett, “If the US Won’t Sell You Weapons, France Might Still Hook You Up,” *Vice News*, September 10, 2015 <https://news.vice.com/article/if-the-us-wont-sell-you-weapons-france-might-still-hook-you-up>.



Exercise Capable Eagle: British and French forces conduct a joint exercise to improve military cooperation. An RAF Typhoon (top) and a French Air Force Mirage (below) practice their drills together during the 2013 exercise. Photo credit: Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom.

equipment worth \$7 billion. These defense sales, and several others, not only help France conduct what is often termed as “realpolitik defense diplomacy” with Gulf countries but also heavily contribute to the wellbeing of its national defense industry, which relies extensively on exports.<sup>13</sup> In addition to selling various types of weapons, France periodically conducts joint exercises with Gulf militaries. For example, in November 2013, French and Saudi Arabian forces conducted an air and ground drill to train soldiers on offensives in al-Sirwat mountain range in southwestern Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> In February-March of that year, French and Qatari forces conducted their quarterly Gulf Falcon Exercise 2013, involving roughly 1,300 French and 1,700 Qatari soldiers engaged on operational and tactical levels on the ground, in air, and at sea. The previous exercise in 2008, dubbed Gulf Shield 1, involved French, Qatari, and Emirati forces (including 1,500 French military personnel, two frigates and eight Mirage fighter jets) and was focused on large-scale war games in the Gulf.<sup>15</sup>

13 Owen Daniels and Robbie Gramer, “France fills the American arms void,” *Politico*, June 25, 2015.

14 Khamis al-Zahrani, “Saudi Arabia and France continue joint military exercises,” *Al Arabiya*, November 18, 2013.

15 Ben Hall in Paris and Simeon Kerr, “France heads for war games in the Gulf,” *Financial Times*, February 23, 2008 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/77c38c2c-e1a1-11dc-a302-0000779fd2ac.html>.

When French President Hollande addressed the GCC summit in Riyadh in May of last year, following the personal invitation of Saudi King Salman—the first foreign leader to be given this opportunity—he spoke, at least implicitly, of the threats posed by Iran. Throughout the recent nuclear talks with Iran, Paris maintained a hardline stance toward Tehran, which did not go unnoticed in some Gulf capitals. And while France still worries over the growing ballistic missile arsenal and destabilizing influence of Iran in the Gulf, the security priority today is ISIS. “Over half of the 3,000 known European jihadists who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight on behalf of ISIS are French nationals,” of whom more than two hundred have returned to France, according to French intelligence services.<sup>16</sup> The figures are imprecise given the difficulty of effectively tracking down terrorists and would-be-terrorists, but it is reported that in 2015 those numbers had gone up, a sign that the problem was worsening. France is a key member of the anti-ISIS coalition, jointly conducting airstrikes in Iraq and recently in Syria, but also independently striking in the interest of self-defense and retaliation against ISIS for the November 13 attacks in Paris, which President Hollande termed “an act of war.”

16 Dennis Lynch, “Islamic State French Jihadists: Nearly Half Of European Extremists Joining ISIS Are From France,” *International Business Times*, April 8, 2015.

# PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH ADVERSARIES

If partnering with allies on Gulf security is no walk in the park, engaging adversaries can be a nightmare. But history offers clear lessons on this: The exclusion of major powers from regional, geopolitical affairs such as Gulf security has its costs, especially when such powers have important and growing stakes in the region. That happens to be the case with Russia and China, who in recent years have increasingly pointed their strategic compass toward the Middle East, and specifically, the Gulf. In short, for the United States, dialoguing patiently and potentially reaching strategic understandings with Moscow and Beijing over regional security is far more preferable than unfettered competition or conflict.

## RUSSIA

Until the end of the Cold War, relations between Russia (or previously the Soviet Union), and the Arab Gulf States were highly antagonistic due to ideological differences and conflicting strategic agendas. Led by Saudi Arabia, Gulf governments played a crucial role in containing communist influence in the Greater Middle East by working closely with the United States and sponsoring anti-communist groups, including the mujahideen in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union sought to check US influence in the Middle East by backing authoritarian regimes and violent, populist movements that posed a security threat to Israel and challenged the rule of the region's monarchies. That Russia also aggressively competed with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on oil policy did not make things any better with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, four of which—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE—were, and still are, OPEC members.

Russia's influence and involvement in the region drastically decreased following the collapse of the Soviet Union (the decline, in fact, may have started after Egypt, led by President Anwar Sadat, kicked thousands of Soviet advisors and troops out of the country in 1972). In the 1990s, the US position in the Middle East, and across the globe, was simply unparalleled. Russia did preserve some defense clients during that decade, including Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Libya; and it participated in Middle East peace diplomacy in the Madrid process alongside the United States, but it was a shell of its former self, playing a more modest role in the region

(although Russian cooperation in 1990-1991 on the international coalition against Iraq in the Second Gulf War was instrumental).

The past decade and a half has, in many ways, witnessed a transformation in relations between Russia and the Middle East, and specifically the Gulf, driven primarily by new energy and economic considerations, the fight against Islamist terrorism, growing defense sales, and improved ties with Israel. While the election of Vladimir Putin as President in 1999 is often seen as the event that caused the rebirth in relations, as he emphasized improving economic links with the Arab Gulf States,<sup>17</sup> it was, in fact, Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov who laid out the early blueprint for relations and was the more important force. At present, while there have been tensions regarding Syria between Russia on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE on the other (with Moscow siding with the Syrian regime and Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi actively supporting the rebels), and while Russia's past and current engagements with Iran are a source of concern to several Arab Gulf States, other, above-mentioned strategic interests converge.

First, neither Russia nor the Arab Gulf States are excited about America's Shale Revolution (some Russian oil giants still dispute that the Shale Revolution is even real). Falling oil prices have forced Saudi Arabia to exercise pragmatism and reach out to Russia to cooperate on production. Yet the current deal to raise the price of oil and temporarily freeze production, the success of which hinges on the cooperation of Iran and other OPEC players, is the latest in a series of agreements between the two nations as part of a concerted push to deepen and broaden economic partnerships. For instance, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed six cooperation documents, including a nuclear energy accord—a first in the history of Russian-Saudi relations—during last summer's international economic forum in St. Petersburg. The UAE also has recently inked an agreement with Russia on the development

17 Mark N. Katz, "Convergent Hopes, Divergent Realities: Russia and the Gulf in a Time of Troubles," Policy Paper no. 7, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2015, p.1 <http://www.agsiw.org/convergent-hopes-divergent-realities-russia-and-the-gulf-in-a-time-of-troubles/>.

and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. In 2013, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala and Moscow's Direct Investment Fund established a \$2 billion co-investment fund. With sanctions targeting Moscow, Russia is looking to boost trade with the Middle East and is actively seeking contracts within the GCC. But it is still far from even scratching the surface of existing trade between China and the GCC, estimated at \$150 billion.

Second, the proxy clash in Syria notwithstanding, both Russia and the Arab Gulf States are determined to combat ISIS, and more broadly to stem the tide of violent Islamist extremism in the Middle East and the North Caucasus. That real links between terrorist networks in both regions exist—thousands of Russians seem to have joined ISIS—has pushed all concerned to set aside some of their differences and cooperate on intelligence. Should uncertainty in relations between the United States and its Gulf partners persist or worsen, there is no reason why the Russian-Gulf dialogue could not elevate to the strategic level. Yet beyond the fight against Islamist extremism, Russia believes that the Middle East is not (and never will be) ready for democracy. Like Gulf Arabs, Russia was not sympathetic to the Arab Spring, and here, Putin was very influential. He took a major stance on this issue, expressing outrage against the United States and its allies' intervention in Libya and the brutal murder of Moammar Qaddafi. As Prime Minister at the time, Putin criticized Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for not sufficiently asserting Russia's interests and challenging the West over Libya, and that was one reason for his decision to move Medvedev aside and return to the presidency himself. Putin is very reactive to anything that smacks of forced regime change. This is also why he has been opposed, since day one, to the ouster of Syrian President Bashar Assad without some agreed process—i.e., with Russia's consent and participation.

Third, several GCC states, facing laxity, delay, or opposition from Washington regarding certain weapons releases, have increasingly looked to Moscow and Beijing to meet their defense and security requirements, although the weapons have been primarily tactical. So long as it is easier, faster, and cheaper to buy powerful Russian weaponry, especially in times of immediate need and active combat operations (such as in Yemen), Arab Gulf States will continue to consider the Russian market as a complementary option. Moscow not only earns revenue from selling its military hardware but also looks for opportunities, lately through the UAE,

to acquire high-tech arms it cannot build itself, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Given quality, interoperability, and cost-effectiveness concerns, Arab Gulf States are unlikely, at least anytime soon, to start buying strategic weapons and platforms from Russia. Yet, while the United States remains the industry vendor of choice for the Arab Gulf States, the Russian market will continue to make headway into the GCC and provide Moscow political influence, at the expense of Washington.

Fourth, Russian Jewish migration to Israel, though on the decrease in recent years, is an important factor that explains the increasing closeness of relations between Russia and Israel. But it is not the sole factor. A frank dialogue between high-level leaderships in Moscow and Tel Aviv has continued to develop over the past two decades (especially since the Arab uprisings and the conflict in Syria), serving both nations well and allowing for greater, but still discrete, coordination on intelligence and security. Putin himself has played a leading role in improving the relationship with Israel. He has instructed his top military and intelligence advisors to liaise with their Israeli counterparts on Syria, maintaining a direct hotline about Russian intentions regarding the bombing campaign. Israel has also consulted with Putin on Iran, and while Tel Aviv may not get all it wants from Moscow, the latter has been remarkably open-minded and sensitive to the former's security concerns, perhaps more so than any other country aside from the United States. That Russia also might succeed in saving the Syrian regime as a result of its heavy-handed military intervention serves Israeli national security interests, despite Israeli official rhetoric stating the opposite. Important differences and a good amount of mistrust remains, but the status quo is a radical departure from previous thinking and behavior on both sides, when the Soviet Union considered Israel as a dangerous client of capitalist America, and Israel viewed the Soviet Union as a threat to its existence.

## CHINA

China, currently the world's largest net importer of petroleum, is an influential actor with enduring trade and energy interests in the Middle East. Whereas US reliance on Middle Eastern oil has been steadily shrinking in recent years, roughly half of China's imported oil now comes from the Gulf. These numbers will increase as a result of Chinese state energy companies' investments in Iraq and Iran, and as the burgeoning relationship with Saudi Arabia develops. Should that supply be

disrupted due to regional insecurity, China's vital interests would be severely affected. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that China's involvement in the Gulf will increase with time. The only question is what further contributions China would be willing and able to make in the future, and how those would interfere with US designs.

To preserve its trade and energy interests in the region, China has aptly balanced relations with various oil producing nations, including arch rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is no easy feat.<sup>18</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping was the first foreign leader to visit Iran after the conclusion of the nuclear deal with the P5+1 powers, and in September 2014, for the first time in history, two Chinese warships docked at Bandar Abbas, Iran's main naval port.<sup>19</sup> On his last trip to the region in January 2016, President Xi met with Gulf leaders to discuss the establishment of a free trade zone. The two sides expect to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) within a year.<sup>20</sup> Gulf countries increasingly see China as a reliable trade partner for the future, and given the country's massive reliance on Gulf oil, it is destined to be a customer for years to come.<sup>21</sup> Similar to Russia, China also has offered its technical expertise in civilian nuclear power to the Arab Gulf States. Unsatisfied with US cooperation on nuclear technology, Saudi Arabia has explored opportunities with China, and recently signed a deal with Chinese nuclear engineering company CNECC to potentially build sixteen nuclear reactors by 2032.<sup>22</sup>

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The arms trade between China and the Arab Gulf States is relatively small. But one particular item some Gulf countries have lately sought from China is the armed UAV, or drone. For example, Abu Dhabi is suspected to be the first foreign government to have bought the Chinese Wing Loong I, a medium altitude, long endurance drone (similar to the American MQ-1 Predator) with surveillance capabilities and sufficient lift to carry two matched air-to-surface missiles. Saudi Arabia is believed to have followed suit three years later, and might currently be using an unspecified number it purchased from China, against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Houthi rebels in Yemen.<sup>23</sup> In private discussions, Gulf leaders almost always mention to their US visitors how the Chinese drone market has been especially useful for their military operations.

China today is an economic juggernaut in the Middle East, and its economic weight will continue to be felt for years to come. While it is not yet a major political power or security player, its role will most probably increase in the future, as interdependence in energy trade deepens over time, and as the country starts to implement its "New Silk Road" strategy, which seeks to build transport infrastructure through Eurasia, the Middle East, and Europe. Having pledged to spend \$40 billion to finance the construction of infrastructure at major checkpoints along old Silk Road trade routes, including

those in the Gulf, there is little doubt that China is committed to Gulf security. China has already begun to shift to a more activist role in the Greater Middle East—trying to broker a peace deal in Afghanistan, more confidently express its views about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, support Iraq in its fight against ISIS, and forge closer ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It is in the maritime domain where China will most likely get more involved in Gulf security. From 2009 to 2015, "China dispatched 19 naval escort

18 Jon B. Alterman, "China's Balancing Act in the Gulf," Gulf Analysis Paper, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2013 <http://csis.org/publication/gulf-analysis-paper-chinas-balancing-act-gulf>.

19 Thomas Erdbrink and Chris Buckley, "China and Iran to Conduct Joint Naval Exercises in the Persian Gulf," *New York Times*, September 21, 2014.

20 Li Xiaokunli and Xing Zhigang, "China and Gulf Nations resume free trade agreement talks," *China Daily*, [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-01/21/content\\_23182530.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-01/21/content_23182530.htm).

21 Alterman, China's Balancing Act in the Gulf, Op. cit.

22 Lyu Chang and Hu Meidong, "China Nuclear to bring nuclear power to Saudi Arabia," *China Daily*, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-01/21/content\\_23175711.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-01/21/content_23175711.htm).

23 UAV/UCAV II, Chinese Military Aviation Blogspot, November 27, 2015, <http://chinese-military-aviation.blogspot.com/p/uavucav-ii.html>.



Lt. Fasoli meets members of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy aboard the USS Mason. In 2013, the US Navy and CPLA Navy undertook a joint visit, board, search and seizure training event in the Gulf of Aden as part of a joint US-China counter piracy partnership. *Photo credit:* US Navy/Wikimedia.

fleets to the Gulf of Aden and the Somali waters.”<sup>24</sup> The Chinese maritime mission largely focuses on “naval diplomacy, combating piracy, disaster relief, and ocean rescue.”<sup>25</sup> But as a sign of a possible shift from a soft to a hard military approach and presence, in May 2015, China teamed up with Russia and conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea. The naval drill, code-named

“Joint Sea 2015,” lasted five days and involved nine ships from both countries.<sup>26</sup> For China, these operations are part of a larger strategy to become more of a blue water maritime power—part of its 2013 One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, designed to connect major Eurasian economies through infrastructure, trade, and investment.

<sup>24</sup> Luo Dan, “China Dispatches Escort Fleet to Somali Waters,” February 12, 2014 <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2014/12/02/191s854861.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, “China and Russia Conclude Naval Drill in Mediterranean,” *Diplomat*, May 22, 2015 <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-and-russia-conclude-naval-drill-in-mediterranean/>.

# US POLICY OPTIONS

It is easy to see why a more flexible or inclusive Gulf security system can cause, or may have already caused, many in the US Government, and specifically in the Pentagon, to have reservations. After all, the United States has invested a huge amount of material resources and political capital over the years to preserve its undisputed influence in the Gulf and to maintain the closest links to the region's leaderships. No US official would like to see the United States' strategic position in the Gulf—still a critical region of the world to global commerce and the US economy—wane in relation to other countries, and especially not to adversaries, such as Russia and China. These concerns, and others, are perfectly understandable and more than reasonable.

But change, if effectively managed by Washington, could be a blessing in disguise. US Gulf strategy, given its mixed record in recent times, could use a thorough update that carefully takes note of new regional and international trends and shows flexibility toward more innovative and sustainable ways to police the world's most important repository of reasonably priced energy resources. If it is not clear by now, the United States cannot and should not indefinitely secure that region on its own. Otherwise, as one senior US military official recently put it, "the free-rider problem will not go away on its own."<sup>27</sup>

Many US military leaders and planners are aware of this conundrum, yet concrete measures, or even a serious discussion, have yet to be launched. Bureaucracies, especially large ones such as the Department of Defense, often resist revisiting old assumptions and drastically changing long-established processes. However, to arrest the harmful trend of declining US influence in the Gulf, the United States first has to recognize that Gulf security is no longer an exclusive US domain. Indeed, the days of unchallenged US hegemony are long gone. As counterintuitive as it sounds, the United States benefits in the long run from smartly loosening its grip on the Gulf, integrating allies, and engaging adversaries. That is very hard work, but it should be done.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with a current senior US military official who spoke on the condition of anonymity, February 13, 2016, Arlington, VA.

## QUADRILATERAL SECURITY FORUM

It is especially important to affirm that any new, multilateral security arrangement in the Gulf must, first and foremost, be communicated to and developed with the Arab Gulf States themselves. The last thing the United States and its allies need is even the perception of outside powers strategizing and making plans about the security of the region, without the direct input and involvement of regional stakeholders themselves.

The literature on burden-sharing in world politics has tended to focus on the most useful distribution of *military* responsibilities in any given alliance. This is understandable. Military (and economic) resources are the most sensitive, precious, and jealously guarded assets that nation-states possess in this perilous international system. Yet this narrow focus can be deceptive at times, "since states, like individuals, can [and often do] specialize in their alliance activities and relationships, thus yielding potential efficiency gains for the alliance as a whole."<sup>28</sup>

Similar to the P5+1 diplomatic construct that was used for the Iran nuclear talks, a P3+1 model, comprising the United States, the UK, and France as three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and a Gulf party, would be a helpful framework to consider for Gulf security. That begs the question: Would the Gulf side be represented by a single, leading state or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole?

If the Gulf side does express interest in this new security forum, only they can determine the issue of Gulf participation. The benefits of GCC-wide involvement to the United States, Gulf security, and the Arab Gulf States themselves are obvious; and the costs of one individual Gulf country attempting to speak for the rest—assuming that is even feasible or realistic—are, too. Unfortunately, though, while multilateralism within the GCC might be highly desirable in this increasingly unsafe and resource-starved regional environment, it remains a myth. Numerous activities that the United States has wanted to pursue in the Gulf for the sake of

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Zycher, *A Generalized Approach for Analysis of Alliance Burden-Sharing* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, September 1990), p. 5. <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/notes/2009/N3047.pdf>.



A British Royal Navy Marine and a French Marine perform weapons drills following an amphibious landing drill during Exercise Corsican Lion in 2012. *Photo credit:* Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom.

collective interests—be it in capacity building or general deterrence—have been frustrated because of tensions, divisions, and objective differences among the Arab Gulf States.

If a US-led quadrilateral security forum can help encourage the development of a truly multilateral GCC, it would be a net gain for all sides. However, if that proves to be too difficult to achieve and continues to be hampered by the same problems that have dogged GCC multilateralism for years, then the scenario of an individual Gulf state representing its neighbors is an option, though one with many faults and little chance of materializing. After all, if Gulf history is any guide, the main reason why GCC multilateralism has not happened yet is precisely because of fears of domination by any one state—most notably by Saudi Arabia—over the others. So the thought of all Gulf governments sanctioning Riyadh to speak for the group, or perhaps the majority of the group (since Oman is almost always in its own league, and Qatar is pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy), is farfetched, although it cannot be ruled out, especially with the rise of a younger and more assertive Saudi Arabia that is interested in assuming leadership roles, which some states might find attractive.

This new Gulf security forum would preferably have a headquarters in the region to discuss political-military affairs and coordinate activities to which the British and the French would contribute. If establishing a headquarters is too problematic a goal, meetings could happen on a rotational basis. For example, instead of setting up such a facility in Riyadh, then perhaps US, British, and French officials would meet with their Gulf counterparts at a different location every time. That, too, is a decision that would have to be made jointly with Gulf partners to avoid any unnecessary political faux pas and promote the spirit of collaboration.

Logistics aside, the areas in which the UK and France can be most helpful and more effectively share the burden are political-cultural dialogue, capacity building, training, counterterrorism, joint military exercises, and defense industrial modernization. These activities have been happening already, but on a bilateral basis, which has typically been the preferred format in the Gulf. So the idea is to switch to a more collective or multilateral model for the sake of effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Ideally, instead of the United States, the UK, and France separately working on these issues and others with Gulf partners, a serious attempt to organize and integrate—where it makes sense, of

course—would be made. For example, Washington would include its British and French allies in the conceptualization and implementation of the agendas of future GCC summits. Specifically, the working groups that came out of the US-GCC Camp David Summit in May 2015 would have to be updated to make room for British and French input and operationalization.

The sight of American, British, and French militaries periodically conducting joint exercises and training with Arab Gulf militaries theoretically provides more robust security reassurances to Gulf partners, and equally important, boosts conventional deterrence against present and future adversaries including a bolder, post-sanctions Iran that could be less constrained in its foreign policy. Moreover, in a strategic environment increasingly defined by more complex and less traditional threats, the United States could lean on its British and French allies and think together about more effective and efficient ways to address Iran's successful asymmetric warfare, and the threats posed by terrorist organizations, including ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Yet perhaps the most important conversation with British and French allies from which the United States could really benefit is on the issue of political reform in the region. No amount of collective action by outside powers can, on its own, preserve Gulf security without Gulf governments committing to the process of political and economic reform. Here, there is very little outsiders can do to help. But given their extensive experiences in the region (since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the British and the French are uniquely positioned to offer advice to the United States on how to better cultivate and manage relationships with the Arab Gulf States and help steer the process of reform in the right direction. Furthermore, should the United States, the UK, and France speak with one voice on the subject of reform to their Gulf interlocutors, it would underscore the primacy of the issue and show that it is not only a US, but a

mutual concern, which hopefully would further incentivize Gulf partners to hasten the reform process.

The UK and France have deliberately put themselves in a position to get more involved in the security and politics of the Gulf. Yet, as promising as increased British and French contributions to Gulf security can be, a big, potential challenge presents itself: How long can the UK and France actually share the burden before other priorities in their more immediate environment—e.g., European security—take precedence? To what extent does the future of NATO affect British and French national objectives, plans, and capabilities? It is likely that a strengthened NATO could free the UK and France up to augment their security engagement in the region. However, NATO revitalization is definitely not a foregone conclusion. Russia's military revanchism has drastically altered Europe's security landscape, from Ukraine to Syria on NATO's southern flank. Additionally, Europe is fighting a "rot from within" caused by the rise of political fringe movements, the EU is facing internal challenges (e.g., Brexit, Grexit), reduced defense spending, and a major refugee crisis. These are real problems that could constrain British and French overseas posture, but the United States faces similar political and economic challenges at home, all of which reinforce the goal of cost-effective multilateralism in Gulf security.

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### STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Russia and China are most likely to raise objections and express concerns about increased US-UK-French cooperation and collaboration in the region, but Washington, London and Paris can make an effort to clarify to Beijing and Moscow that this US-led arrangement would not be in opposition to their strategic interests. It is worth emphasizing that Russia and China do not dispute that the United States has a key role in Gulf security and the Middle East more broadly, and they have incentives to preserve and work within US hegemony in the short and medium term; however, they do, and

will continue to, resist their deliberate exclusion. Russia's intervention in Syria is the latest example.

Of course, there should be no illusions about the difficulty of US engagement with China and Russia. US officials have asked China for assistance in patrolling the Gulf, but Beijing has shown little enthusiasm to operate beyond its narrowly-defined interests. Even if China agrees to contribute more military resources, its capabilities are questionable. While China has been active in maritime cooperation to fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden, it does not yet have the military might or expertise to police regional conflict zones on a sustained basis. Furthermore, China has other priorities in its own neighborhood, including cross-strait relations, instability on the Korean Peninsula, and competition with Japan. Chinese officials are aware that further involvement in the Gulf could lead to strategic overreach, which they desperately want to avoid. Another complicating factor is China's views of, and relations with, Iran. China perceives Iran as a considerable and unavoidable regional power, with which it wishes to build stronger ties, particularly given the impact Tehran's policies have on Chinese ambitions and designs in the region. This could muddle things with the United States which, despite the recently-inked nuclear deal with Iran, continues to have tense and adversarial relations

with the Islamic Republic. It is even possible that China could use stronger relations with Iran as a means to check US regional influence, although getting too cozy with Tehran risks undermining the delicate balancing act Beijing performs with the Arab Gulf States.

Russia's regional agenda, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. While it shares the United States' concerns about Islamist terrorism in and from the Middle East, and it does have important capabilities in the region and elsewhere, Russia is actively and aggressively competing with the United States for influence. Although a lot remains unclear in the story of Russia's military campaign in Syria, and despite the fact that Moscow announced plans to pull most of its assets from the area, there is much evidence to suggest that US and Russian aims were at loggerheads; as a result, Moscow has made it extremely difficult to achieve lasting peace in Syria and effectively combat ISIS. Russia has a different vision for, and philosophy toward, the region, and it is antithetical to inclusiveness and openness. Challenges notwithstanding, the premise and strategy of pragmatically and sternly engaging adversaries on issues of mutual concern—a consistent practice in the history of American foreign policy—remains sound.

# CONCLUSION

Gulf security is increasingly becoming a crowded geopolitical space, and this has both positive and negative aspects. It is good because it encourages (and even pressures) the United States to think more strategically about its long-term interests in the region, and it creates opportunities for Washington to finally get serious about burden-sharing and involving its closest and most capable allies in policing the world's most important East-West highway. It is bad because strategic adversaries such as Russia and China have smartly exploited the United States' declining fortunes and are encroaching on its autonomy and sphere of influence in the Gulf. The Gulf, as one author once nicely described the East Asian order, "appears as 'ripe for multilateralism' as it appears 'ripe for rivalry'."<sup>29</sup> This new strategic environment in the Gulf heralds a future Gulf security order that surpasses the logic of a US-controlled hub-and-spoke.

None of this suggests that US hegemony in the Gulf is passé, or that the United States is less pivotal to the region's major security and political affairs. The United States' physical presence in the Gulf is, and will remain, a critical component of Gulf security for years to come. No major, external political outcomes happen in the Gulf without the blessing of the United States, and no major conventional war is likely to take place, as long as the United States is forward deployed in the region and credibly

committed to its security. Yet today's threats are no longer tank formations crossing borders and mad dictators bent on territorial conquest. Present and future battles will be fought in the shadows and in the realm of ideas, especially in the Middle East.

To be most effective and efficient in its regional pursuits and to gradually reduce its obligations in the Middle East without risking a drastic deterioration in security and an uptick in conflict,

Today's threats are no longer tank formations crossing borders and mad dictators bent on territorial conquest. Present and future battles will be fought in the shadows and in the realm of ideas, especially in the Middle East.

the United States would be wise to seek partnership with its closest, oldest, and most capable allies. Greater multilateralism in Gulf security would come with costs for Washington, including a reduction in US policy autonomy. Giving up security bilateralism also would challenge the exclusive access and relationships that the United States has maintained with Gulf governments. However, as this report suggests, it is likely an acceptable price to pay and a worthy investment that would help secure longer-term US and collective interests in the region. Furthermore, the United States' commanding power would still shape the policies of its British and French allies and set the agenda in a new multilateral Gulf

security framework. If free-riding is a US concern and a source of frustration for Washington regarding both its allies and adversaries, then maybe it is time to closely examine the concept of burden-sharing and turn it into a reality, in one of the world's most vital regions.

<sup>29</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "American Hegemony and East Asian Order," op. cit.

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A recipient of the Thought Leadership Award from the Atlantic Council and of the Abshire-Inamori Leadership Award from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Saab has more than fourteen years of experience working as a political-military analyst, advisor, and corporate manager on the Middle East. He is often called upon to brief various executive and legislative agencies in the US Government. Saab's latest monographs on the Arab Gulf and broader region include *The New Containment: Changing America's Approach to Middle East Security* (Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Atlantic Council: July 2015); *Beyond Camp David: A Gradualist Strategy to Upgrade the US-Gulf Security Partnership* (Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Atlantic Council: July 2015, with Barry Pavel); *Artful Balance: Future US Defense Strategy and Force Posture in the Gulf* (Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Atlantic Council: March 2015, with Barry Pavel); and *The Gulf Rising: Defense Industrialization in Saudi Arabia and the UAE* (Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Atlantic Council: May 2014).

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