

Dealing with the new Gulf Security vacuum.

The Gulf countries again face the prospect of a security vacuum as the US decreases its presence in the region. Various alternative options are being considered.

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When Ebrahim Raisi takes over as president of Iran in August he will be doing so at a time when discussions are also ongoing on the future of Gulf security given that the Americans have indicated a shift in their military posture to reflect their new concerns in the Asia-Pacific region. Some have compared this moment to 1971, when the British, rather abruptly announced their withdrawal “east of Suez”. Such comparisons are not very useful.

All the countries of the region are in a very different place now than in 1971. At that time the Gulf states were weak and fragile, and had got used to the idea of the “British protection”, so had not really done any thinking on what comes after. Iran was led by a Shah who harboured territorial ambitions in the Gulf, but lacked the resolve to pursue them. More broadly, the world was locked in a cold war which determined security decisions nations could take.

Fifty years on, in 2021 the story is different. The Arab Gulf states have matured – they have an active diplomacy and they have invested billions in their defence capabilities. In their different ways they have built relations with countries near and far, and they cannot be seen as easy pickings for a thirsty predator. Iran on the other hand is now an Islamic Republic led by a Shia theocracy still inspired by the revolutionary fervour of 1979. Its foreign policy can be described at best as disruptive. One can say that attempts to box it in by sanctions have only partly succeeded – as its forays in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere show. It has inherited from the Shah ambitions to turn the Gulf into a Persian lake, and the American deterrent was the biggest obstacle on its way so far.

So for the Arab Gulf states it remains a dangerous neighbour. Dangerous, but not irrational, even if its actions often seem erratic. The zealots of the revolution are reined in. Its diplomatic, military and ideological moves are calculated, and taken through a chain of command that leads directly to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamanei and the Supreme National Security Council. Raisi will have a say in foreign policy and security decisions, but not the final say, and the voice of others will probably carry more weight than his. But he will be the face of Iranian policy in front of the world, and this when big decisions on the future of security in the Gulf are on the horizon.

Replicating NATO and the OSCE in the Gulf

For a while now there has been a debate ongoing in diplomatic circles about how to manage the future of Gulf security, once there is less of an American presence. Models from Europe have been discussed, although so far not much progress appears to have been made.

To put it simply the options can be grouped in two categories, but that are not in themselves mutually exclusive.

The first is to create a NATO type military organisation. In this Iran would not be the partner, but the perceived threat. There will have to be an integrated military structure, other

countries including the US, European countries, and possibly India could be included, apart from the GCC countries. Some even suggest Israel should be included too. To succeed such an alliance will have to have solid guarantees that any threat for one be considered a threat for all – an equivalent to the famous article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Many consider this option to be too ambitious – a watered down version is possible, but if it is too watered down it may defeat the purpose.

The second option is to try to organise in the Gulf a collaborative security framework – similar to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE. The Russians have been flagging up this option without giving much detail, but one can assume that it would bring in Iran and Iraq, as well as the GCC states, with possibly others such as Russia and the US too. Whilst this may sound attractive, the experience of the OSCE is not encouraging. Whilst the OSCE (and its precursor the CSCE) contributed much to the end of the cold war and the transition from communism in Eastern Europe its recent record of ensuring the security of states has been put under question by the Russian shenanigans in Ukraine and Georgia, and Russia's own general disregard of rules in the international system. But some argue that despite its shortcomings the OSCE remains an important and useful framework for dealing with European security issues, and replicating at least its best bits, in the Gulf will be a positive thing.

There is however another way to look at this. In the same way that Europe has embraced both NATO and the OSCE, even if some, particularly the Russians, consider them to be contradictory, so the Gulf region may be looking at two not one structure for the future: one of like minded states who promise to support each other in case of need; the other a broader, more inclusive framework which can provide the space for problems to be discussed and hopefully resolved, and where a process of confidence building can also emerge.

As this debate goes on, snippets of news are emerging about discussions Iran may be having with Saudi Arabia and possibly other Gulf states. Its early days to be talking about a rapprochement, and even if it comes it is likely to be a modest one. But anything that defuses tension and the prospect of an escalation that can lead to war should be welcomed.

This diplomatic activity is taking place under the shadow of another space where US withdrawal is already causing havoc – Afghanistan. There is no comparison between the situation in Afghanistan and that in the Gulf, but the ease with which the Taliban appear to be filling the vacuum left by the American is helping to focus minds. A vacuum is never a good thing, and that goes for the Gulf region as well.

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