



WORKING PAPER

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Europe Needs a Regional Strategy on Iran

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Summary

The rift between Europe and the United States over Iran is deepening. Two years of U.S. maximum pressure on Tehran have not yielded the results Washington had hoped for, while the Europeans have failed to put up enough resistance for their transatlantic partner to change course. Worse, the U.S. policy threatens to destabilize the broader Persian Gulf, with direct consequences for Europe.

To get ahead of the curve and regain leverage, the European Union (EU), its member states, and the United Kingdom have to look beyond their relations with the Islamic Republic and address wider regional security challenges. The United States' incipient retreat as a security guarantor and Russia's increased interest in the region make it necessary for Europe to engage beyond its borders.

Despite being barely alive, the 2015 international nuclear deal with Iran offers a good starting point. The Europeans should regionalize some of the agreement's basic provisions to include the nuclear newcomers on the Arab side of the Gulf. Doing so would advance a nonproliferation agenda that is aimed not at a single country but at the region's broader interests.

Similarly, the Europeans should engage Iran, Iraq, and the six Arab nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council in talks about regional security. Rather than suggesting an all-encompassing security framework, for which the time is not yet ripe, they should pursue a step-by-step approach aimed at codifying internationally recognized principles at the regional level.

European Proposals for the Gulf

Concretely, the Europeans should ask the Gulf states to:

- **Adopt universal nonproliferation standards.** The Europeans should encourage the Gulf states to immediately apply standards such as the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol and international conventions on nuclear safety and disaster management.
- **Agree on selected provisions from the 2015 deal.** The Europeans should urge the Gulf states to adopt, where applicable, measures that circumscribe nascent nuclear programs. These provisions would include placing limits on domestic uranium enrichment and giving up fuel reprocessing.

Based on these first measures, the Europeans should propose—and help achieve—further steps toward a regional dialogue on security issues and threat perceptions. These steps should include:

- Negotiations on a Gulf **charter on maritime security**. This charter would be based on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- The adoption of similar regional **charters banning biological and chemical weapons** as well as nuclear weapons tests.
- Work on comparable **arrangements to limit the range of ballistic missiles and arms trade** in the region. Each arrangement would have notification and inspection mechanisms.

All of these agreements will take time and effort to reach, but merely starting a process of regional dialogue can help change the current escalatory dynamics. With the U.S. administration abandoning leadership at the policy level, it is time for Europe to step in. Building on their diplomatic achievement on the nuclear file while working to rebuild trust with all regional powers, the EU and European states are well poised to pursue such a course.

Looking Beyond Iran at a Volatile Region

This is a moment of profound crisis. Struck by an epic global pandemic, the United States, the countries of the European Union (EU), and Iran are all struggling to maintain control over events. The Islamic Republic, in particular, is facing a perfect storm. The country's economy is in tatters after two years of a U.S. policy of maximum pressure: a shrinking economy, falling oil sales, rising inflation, increasing government debt, deepening unemployment, and declining currency reserves all highlight the country's frailties.¹ Iran's February 2020 parliamentary election showed a tangible decline in public support for the regime, with less than half of those eligible to vote caring enough to do so.²

In an ironic twist, both Iran and the United States have experienced wild outbreaks of the new coronavirus, with thousands of deaths as a result. In Iran, the pandemic's impact has been compounded by U.S. sanctions and domestic mismanagement and corruption. Each side has refused humanitarian aid from the other.³

Tehran and Washington have also continued to threaten a wider military confrontation. Despite mutual assurances that neither side is aiming at a war, severe miscalculations may still lead quickly to an uncontrolled escalation. That happened in January 2020, when a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad's airport that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani was followed by Iranian missile attacks on U.S. forces based in Iraq.

More broadly, U.S. policy toward Iran and the wider region is highly destabilizing for Europe. The U.S. administration's outsourcing of its regional policymaking to Riyadh and Tel Aviv, in general, and its unwavering support for the Saudi military campaign in Yemen, in particular, have increased, not lowered, the potential for escalation. The U.S. president's abrupt decision in October 2019 to abandon America's Kurdish allies in northern Syria and the rash targeting of Soleimani have endangered the international community's fight against the remnants of the so-called Islamic State. Europeans see their security interests directly—and negatively—affected by Washington's decisions, which are made with no input from the EU, its member states, or even the United Kingdom.

That is why, after years of fruitlessly trying to maintain its own Iran policy that differs from the U.S. approach, the EU should refocus its efforts on the regional level. The union should prepare now for late 2020, when, ideally, the coronavirus crisis will have been overcome and a change of policy at the White House could be in the offing after November's U.S. presidential election. The EU should look beyond Iran at the regional web of conflicts, rivalries, and possibilities and address them in a comprehensive way. That implies a regional approach and a broad set of policies.

The EU's Goals: Still Sound but No Longer Enough

Despite momentous changes in the region over the past two decades and their implications for Iran, the EU's strategic goals toward the Islamic Republic have not changed. They center on three aims, two of which are preventive, and one of which is proactive: first, to keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon; second, to avert a full-blown, interstate war involving Iran; and third, to demonstrate the EU's ability to act on the international scene.⁴

The EU achieved all three of these goals in 2015, when it helped conclude the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement among China, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Russia, the UK, and the United States on Iran's nuclear program. European policymakers have clung to this deal ever since.

While sound in principle, however, the EU's Iran policy has failed to take account of regional dynamics, in particular around the Persian Gulf. This is awkward given the bloc's track record in its own neighborhood, where it is often criticized for favoring region-wide policies over tailor-made approaches for individual countries. Yet, the EU's stance on Iran can also be explained and defended: the union has spent the last seventeen years engaging with Tehran, mainly on the nuclear file—a country-specific issue with global security implications on which the Europeans saw a possibility of diplomatic success.⁵

The JCPOA did help prevent a war over Iran's nuclear program. But the Europeans' self-imposed limited focus has led them to neglect the Gulf's violent rivalries, which fuel the wars in the wider Middle East, from Libya to Syria to Yemen. It is time to complete the picture.

What was feasible in 2015 no longer holds today because of changed circumstances. First and foremost is the turn in the United States' Iran policy under the current president, who unilaterally abandoned the JCPOA in May 2018. That move upended a concerted international effort to contain Iran's nuclear program. The reasons for Washington's withdrawal range from substantive but overblown criticism of the deal itself to fantasies about regime change—and a deep dislike by the incumbent president of anything his predecessor did.⁶ Two years of European efforts to bring Washington back into the deal have not borne fruit. The parties to an international agreement can be called to order, but they cannot be forced to uphold it if they perceive it to be against their interests—least of all the United States.

More importantly, alongside the content of the JCPOA, its context is equally relevant—and that includes the regional setting. Recent years have brought the deal's Achilles' heel to light: concluded between Iran and seven world powers only, the agreement allowed regional players to criticize it from its inception. This does not mean that states in the region should have been included in the talks that produced the accord: that would probably have precluded any agreement at all.⁷ However, their exclusion allowed the deal's opponents to stall the political momentum generated among the signatories at the regional level.

This dynamic reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how the deal could or should interact with regional issues. The JCPOA was not going to miraculously enable regional cooperation, as the signatories anticipated—carefully, but not without hope—in its preface.⁸ Rather, it is the other way around: for the nuclear deal to be fully implemented, an enabling regional environment was required but never present. Instead, the power balances in the Gulf have shifted considerably and incoherently, from the intra-Arab dispute over Qatar's fence-sitting vis-à-vis Iran to Tehran's advances in Iraq, and from Washington's gradual withdrawal to Russia's increasing role.⁹

Ultimately, it is time to see Iran not as the problem but as one part of the solution, with the other parts coming from the region. There was a specific reason for taking on Tehran—and only Tehran—over the nuclear file: Iran was the only country running a secret uranium enrichment program in possible violation of its international obligations. That is why this issue was dealt with first by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and then by the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the world powers represented there. Yet, singling out Iran in the ongoing regional confrontation is counterproductive. When it comes to meddling in other countries' affairs and expanding their influence across the region and beyond, several powers are to blame.

Time for a Paradigm Shift

The EU needs to institute a paradigm shift in its relations with Iran. From a country-specific policy focused on nonproliferation, the union needs to move toward a Gulf strategy that accounts for the Islamic Republic's ties with its littoral neighbors. As it happens, the promotion of intraregional cooperation is part of the EU's history and continuing success—despite current shortcomings in handling migration, stabilizing national debts, and fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

The Europeans performed a similar paradigm shift in 2003. Then, the U.S. invasion of Iraq propelled France, Germany, and the UK—a trio known as the E3 and joined shortly afterward by the entire EU—to venture into unknown territory by engaging on security policy in the Middle East. This had previously been Washington's preserve, with European allies confined to getting on board with U.S. policy, staying on the sidelines, or picking up the pieces by funding and organizing reconstruction and reconciliation work.¹⁰ It was in this context that the Europeans proposed addressing different sets of issues beyond nonproliferation.¹¹

In institutional terms, the timing on the EU side is good now. The European Commission that took office in December 2019 aims to be “more strategic, more assertive and more united” in its foreign policy, in the words of its president, Ursula von der Leyen.¹² After the U.S.-Iranian escalation in Iraq in January 2020, the EU's Council of Ministers mandated the union's foreign policy chief to talk to all parties to help deescalate tensions in the region, support political dialogue, and promote a political regional solution.¹³

Although a focus on either Iran as a country or the nuclear deal as an issue is too narrow, the EU's point of departure should still be the JCPOA. It remains the law of the land, having been enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2231 in July 2015.¹⁴ The deal also embodies the compromise that all signatories bar the United States continue to uphold. In the case of Iran, that pledge is at least rhetorical: although Tehran has ceased to observe some of the deal's limits, it has declared that move to be temporary and reversible if the other parties return to compliance.¹⁵

It would be illusory to come to a better deal without somehow maintaining the original. The JCPOA may be an “empty vessel” right now, in the words of nonproliferation expert Robert Einhorn.¹⁶ But rather than break it entirely, the signatories need to fill it with life again. At the same time, it is impossible to return to the old text, even if there is a change in U.S. administration after November, without taking into account the changed regional circumstances.

The difficult task ahead is therefore to preserve the deal while going regional. Doing so would open the door to a renegotiation of sorts of the JCPOA under the guise of regional talks. And it would encourage both Iran and the Arab states to substantiate their positions on existing proposals for regional security cooperation.

Preserving the Nuclear Deal

The 2015 nuclear agreement was a simple bargain. In return for Iran accepting strict limits on its purportedly civilian nuclear program, the world would lift its restrictions on trade with the country.¹⁷ Since the United States withdrew from the accord and reimposed economic sanctions on Iran, trade has dried up nearly entirely, as the remaining parties to the deal fear the reach of U.S. measures. What is more, the Europeans find it increasingly hard to promote the economic engagement prescribed by the deal as the Iranian regime becomes ever more repressive.

Either way, this failure to maintain trade led Tehran to reduce its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA from mid-2019 onward.¹⁸ Yet, although the deal has been declared dead many times over, it technically still holds for as long as seven of the eight signatories profess their preference to keep it alive and the IAEA can continue to inspect Iran’s nuclear sites.¹⁹

A Need to Restore Trade

The difficulties in upholding the deal are exemplified by European efforts to set up a barter platform to enable legitimate trade with Iran. Although in principle bound only by EU laws, the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), established in January 2019, would implicitly respect U.S. legislation by focusing on humanitarian trade—at least, initially. Such commerce is exempt from U.S. sanctions but cannot be carried out because international banks have overcomplied with the measures.²⁰ It was organizationally challenging to set up an instrument that can correspond with Iranian banks without falling foul of internationally agreed standards to stop money laundering and terrorist financing.

In the end, it took INSTEX over fourteen months to execute its first transaction. The sale of equipment for blood treatment from Germany to Iran on March 31, 2020, was valued at around €500,000 (\$537,000).²¹ The instrument is now fully operational, but it is unclear when the next transaction will take place. It is difficult to find European companies willing to expose themselves to Washington by using this official channel for their remaining trade with Iran. A much-touted Swiss humanitarian channel approved by the U.S. Department of State faces similar constraints because companies are required to disclose their business activities and partners in Iran to U.S. authorities.²²

Facing the threat of U.S. sanctions and with few banking channels open, EU-Iranian trade is at its lowest since before the nuclear negotiations began in 2003. From 2018 to 2019, overall trade between Iran and the EU's then twenty-eight member states shrank by 72 percent. In the same period, Iranian exports to Europe dropped below €1 billion (\$1.1 billion)—a massive 93 percent decline—and European exports to Iran were halved to around €4.5 billion (\$4.8 billion).²³ Given these numbers, an earlier French idea to provide a \$15 billion credit line to Iran, backed by future oil sales, could make a difference. However, it has not come to fruition because it would need explicit U.S. approval.

Yet, the coronavirus pandemic provides an additional and urgent reason to open a humanitarian channel that allows for regular trade in medical products and food staples with Iran.²⁴ Washington did offer some help to Tehran, but only with strings attached, by asking for “a reciprocal humanitarian gesture by the regime: release all wrongly detained dual and foreign national citizens.”²⁵ It is not clear whether the U.S. overture was made in good faith or only intended to be rejected by Tehran. However, as cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, were rising in the United States, including in prisons, the Iranian foreign minister felt obliged to make a surreal counterclaim on Twitter: “[the] US even refuses medical furlough—amid #covid19—for innocent men jailed in horrific facilities. Release our men.”²⁶

Beyond petty point scoring, the U.S. offer fell short of international conventions. Contrary to development aid, which is often conditional on issues such as political or economic reform, humanitarian assistance in times of crisis is given without prerequisites. What is more, besides aid, it is humanitarian trade that is needed. After all, the newest iPhone is still on sale in Tehran, but European-made drugs are not.

Back to Breakout Time

Ironically, after failing to provide the relief they had announced to Iran, the E3 triggered the JCPOA's dispute-resolution mechanism in January 2020 over Tehran's gradual reductions in compliance.²⁷ Intended to show at least some European resolve vis-à-vis Iran, the process was also meant to buy time with the United States, as it could be made to last until after November's election. What has so far not been in the Europeans' interest is to turn the matter over to the UN Security Council, which could snap back the original UN sanctions lifted under the JCPOA.²⁸ Not only would this effectively kill the deal, but it would also give a belated win to a U.S. president seeking reelection.

Although now officially in dispute-resolution mode, the EU should focus on the deal's provisions on breakout time. This term has come to mean the time that it would take a government from deciding to build a bomb to having at least one nuclear warhead ready to deploy it. The intervening time is spent gathering the necessary fissile material—either highly enriched uranium or plutonium—and designing and constructing a carrier vehicle, usually a ballistic missile.

The JCPOA limited Iran's stockpiles of low-enriched uranium and the number and quality of the centrifuges needed to produce higher concentrations of the element. The agreement also shut down Iran's ability to produce any plutonium using the heavy-water reactor near the city of Arak. Thanks to these provisions, the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center has calculated that the JCPOA lengthened the critical breakout time from two or three months to a year.²⁹ That would be enough time to prepare an international response should Tehran go rogue.

Since July 2019, however, Iran has, in five steps, breached some of the limitations imposed on it by the JCPOA. First, Tehran went above the deal's thresholds for the level of enrichment and the size of its stockpiles of enriched uranium. Second, two months later, Iran abandoned restrictions on centrifuge research and development, increasing its capacity to enrich uranium. Third, in November 2019, Tehran restarted enrichment at the underground facility near the village of Fordow. As a confidence-building measure under the JCPOA, the facility had been converted into a research-only center. Fourth, Iran surpassed the limit on heavy-water storage. The fifth step—said by Tehran to be the last—came in January 2020, when Iran announced the end of any “operational” restrictions by the JCPOA, allowing the country's nuclear program to be run purely on the basis of its “technical needs.”³⁰

On the upside, these incremental and openly communicated steps pose no immediate danger with regard to Iran's possible dash for the bomb. They are also meant to be reversible and appear to be carefully crafted internal compromises, given increasing domestic demands in Iran for harsher measures. The country's hardliners are calling for Tehran to quit the deal in its entirety or even ditch the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran has been a party since 1970.³¹

An IAEA report in March 2020 listed the areas in which Iran continues to comply with the deal's provisions. These include real-time monitoring by, and access to facilities for, IAEA inspectors; continued work on the redesigned Arak heavy-water reactor; and observance of the ban on reprocessing spent fuel. The last two of these provisions will prevent Iran from producing weapons-grade plutonium.³² Crucially, the IAEA's sustained work on the ground, with transparency about Iran's steps, is an important distinction to the time before the JCPOA, when Tehran deliberately left the world in the dark about its ultimate intentions.

On the downside, the longer Iran's transgressions last, the more critical the situation will become. Stockpiles can be diluted and centrifuges dismantled, but the knowledge gained from increased research and development—which, under the JCPOA, should have begun only in 2025 and under international supervision—cannot be undone. Resuming enrichment at Fordow raises a particular concern, because this previously clandestine underground site is impenetrable to aerial bombardment. Even if enrichment there is conducted under IAEA supervision, Iran's enemies in the region could be led to suspect the worst and, possibly, take unilateral measures to confront the perceived threat.

Iran's successive steps to reduce its commitments also endanger what is left of international nuclear cooperation under the deal. This is significant for both sides. On the one hand, that cooperation allows Tehran to claim international recognition of its civilian program and hail its modernization with the know-how of Chinese, European, and Russian companies. On the other, collaboration gives the international community insights into, and control over, Iran's nuclear activities.

International cooperation on the construction of the Arak heavy-water reactor depends on regular waivers by the U.S. administration, the most recent of which was issued in late March 2020 and lasts sixty days.³³ Hawks in the United States have long argued for the end of what they consider a proliferation risk.³⁴ The reactivation of the Fordow facility will give them further ammunition.

More concerning is that Iran refused to grant the IAEA access to three specific sites where the agency suspected undeclared nuclear material and nuclear-related activities.³⁵ Tehran appears to argue that the basis for these claims was a set of documents stolen by Israel in 2018 on Iran's pre-JCPOA nuclear past.³⁶ The IAEA's March 2020 report quoted the Iranian government's official response as being "not . . . obliged to respond to such allegations."³⁷ This stonewalling has raised a serious concern with the agency; it also jeopardizes European efforts to save the deal.

The EU and the United States: Disunited They Stand

Anything the Europeans would like to do on the Iran file hinges on U.S. acceptance, which has not been forthcoming. In spring 2018, the U.S. president snubbed the E3's advances to find a compromise between his claim to be able to negotiate a new, better deal and the Europeans' desire to preserve the substance of the existing one. Two years later, he refused to enable shipments of drugs or medical equipment to Iran in response to the coronavirus pandemic. For him, there is no middle ground, no moderation.

Yet, simply hoping for a change at the White House at the start of 2021 is not a viable strategy for three reasons. First and most importantly, change may not come. Four more years of maximum pressure and transatlantic estrangement would wreak havoc even without the expected ego boost the incumbent would get from reelection.

Second, too much can happen between now and the election, as the past twelve months have shown. Another U.S. strike on Iraqi territory like that in January 2020; more attacks on Saudi oil installations like those attributed to Iran in June and September 2019; or increased social unrest in Iran, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia: any of these could quickly lead to military confrontation or internal implosion, with immediate consequences for Gulf countries.

Third, if the deal holds until the fall, it will present a formidable hurdle as it prescribes the lifting of a UN arms embargo on Iran in mid-October. This timing was a hard-fought compromise in the international talks: Tehran had insisted that the ban be lifted immediately after the JCPOA took effect in 2015, but Washington eventually negotiated a five-year extension into the deal's implementation. Yet, there is now little chance of the embargo being ended a mere three weeks before the U.S. presidential election in November.³⁸

Ultimately, the current situation exposes the EU's fundamental weakness as an international actor. The union was instrumental in enabling the negotiations that led to the 2015 deal and was tasked with supervising its implementation. However, the EU could not—or, perhaps, would not—make up for the U.S. withdrawal, nor could it bring Iran back into compliance.

The EU's immediate measures have failed to prevent the JCPOA from being hollowed out with each day of U.S. and Iranian violations. It is therefore time to try a different approach and go regional on the nuclear dossier. Given that the Europeans fight for a UN-mandated agreement, they should promote a multilateral approach that involves not only China and Russia but also regional powers.

If You Can't Solve a Problem, Regionalize It

There are reasons why the EU has shied away from tackling regional escalation in and around the Gulf. Providing security in the region has been Washington's purview; EU member states have “embraced a marginal role under the US security umbrella,” in the words of political scientist Cinzia Bianco, and play second fiddle.³⁹ Crucially, the Europeans' inability to stop the slaughter in Syria or respond boldly to the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 has left them sidelined—both practically and in the minds of policymakers and people in the region.

During the escalation in the Gulf from mid-2019 onward, the Europeans were more bystanders than drivers. They even struggled to come up with a minor maritime mission to protect shipping routes, and that mission did not start its operations until more than half a year after the June 2019 attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz that triggered the initiative.⁴⁰

In addition to this lack of European clout, there continues to be an argument about who is to blame for the regional turmoil. Some see the tumult as mainly Iran's doing; Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Washington, in particular, warn of the Shia crescent taking control of Arab capitals from Beirut to Baghdad and from Damascus to Sanaa.⁴¹ Yet, there is more than one power—both within and outside the region—trying to expand its influence over other countries. Contrary to the nuclear file, on which there was a specific reason for the international community to confront Iran alone, the blame for regional escalation goes around widely in the Gulf.

The key to lessening tensions is to bring all sides to the table to voice their concerns and agree on reciprocal measures—rather than force one country to stop meddling in others' affairs and give free

rein to one's allies, as the United States does with its policy of maximum pressure. Recent events have underscored this delicate state of interwoven affairs. Iraq is becoming a battleground for U.S.-Iranian rivalry, while the war in Yemen is beginning to show cracks in the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Regionalizing the Nuclear Deal

The 2015 nuclear deal is very much a legacy of the 2000s, when Iran was the only country in the region working on a nuclear energy program—much of it in secret. As neighboring countries have embarked on catching up with Iran on nuclear energy, today there is a case for regional cooperation in the nuclear field.

The UAE, the first Arab country to acquire a nuclear power program, began loading fuel into its South Korean–built nuclear reactors at Barakah in March 2020.⁴² Saudi Arabia, too, has plans to construct nuclear reactors, ostensibly to diversify its energy mix. Riyadh has opened a bidding process in which Chinese, French, Russian, South Korean, and U.S. firms are likely to participate.⁴³ Other countries in the region are exploring their options for nuclear energy. The most advanced are Egypt and Jordan, which are in negotiations with Russia to build reactors, and Turkey, which has already begun to construct its first reactor.⁴⁴

The United States, meanwhile, is torn between securing promising contracts for its flailing nuclear industry and maintaining its own nonproliferation standards for commercializing nuclear technology. In 2009, the UAE signed a cooperation agreement with the United States known as a 123 Agreement, which contains the nonproliferation gold standard: Abu Dhabi is to give up uranium enrichment and fuel reprocessing.⁴⁵ Riyadh, in contrast, insists on developing this capacity in the near future when it builds its own reactors.⁴⁶ While the U.S. Congress has become alert to this proliferation risk, the U.S. president appears eager to allow American companies to benefit from reactor-building contracts.⁴⁷

The threat of a regional proliferation race is real. The Saudi crown prince has threatened that his country will acquire a nuclear weapon “as soon as possible” if Iran does so first.⁴⁸ The Turkish president was only slightly shier when he said that he could not accept his country foregoing nuclear weapons because “there is no developed nation in the world that doesn't have them.”⁴⁹ In an already volatile region, this would be the nuclear free-for-all that the 2015 agreement aimed to prevent.

Six Ways to Promote Civilian Nuclear Cooperation

Beyond trying to save the deal in relation to Iran, the EU and its twenty-seven member states, in close coordination with the UK, should take a regional perspective on nuclear matters. By pursuing civilian nuclear programs, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh appear to be deliberately raising the West's stake in their survival.⁵⁰ The Europeans should therefore aim to regionalize the JCPOA by promoting civilian nuclear cooperation around the Gulf, based on existing international standards and the deal's requirements.⁵¹

Specifically, the Europeans should encourage all eight Gulf states—Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—to take six specific steps.

First, the Europeans should urge all states to provisionally apply the IAEA's Additional Protocol, as Iran is doing under the 2015 deal, with a view to simultaneously ratifying it at an agreed date. This protocol can be added onto an existing nuclear safeguards agreement to provide additional tools for verification. In particular, it increases the IAEA's ability to verify the peaceful use of all nuclear material.

Second, the Europeans should press the Gulf states to give up domestic reprocessing facilities, as per Iran's JCPOA requirement and the U.S. 123 Agreement with the UAE. Countries should close down plutonium-yielding heavy-water reactors, again as Iran is required to do under the 2015 deal.

Third, the Europeans should ask the states in the region to strictly limit, if not forgo uranium enrichment. This is a trickier issue. The JCPOA gave Iran a green light to continue some enrichment, but the long-standing nonproliferation policies of the major powers see this as the exception to the rule. With Tehran unlikely to give up its enrichment rights while other states are asked to accept zero enrichment, some creative fudging will be needed. This could include a cap on the level of enrichment based on the JCPOA stipulations but extended indefinitely for all states. This means that Iran would forego enrichment above 5 percent, while its Gulf neighbors would not pursue domestic enrichment altogether.

Fourth, the Europeans should urge the Gulf states to work toward a highly enriched uranium-free zone under IAEA supervision.⁵² This could go some way toward alleviating concerns over Iran's existing enrichment capacities. An accord to create such a zone should link the production and stockpiling of enriched uranium to a country's needs for electricity production from nuclear reactors. The states could collaborate to establish a multilateral fuel bank that would initially serve Saudi Arabia and the UAE but could also deliver fuel to Iran at some point.⁵³

Fifth, the Europeans should encourage all Gulf states to ratify—or pledge to ratify before bringing their first reactor online—a set of international conventions on the safety of nuclear installations and material. These include the Convention on Nuclear Safety, the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, and a number of conventions and protocols on nuclear damage and the resulting liability.⁵⁴ This step would provide international recognition of the Gulf states' civilian intentions, as all other countries with civilian nuclear energy programs have ratified these conventions.

Finally, the Europeans should prompt the states in the region to agree which specific nuclear activities constitute peaceful use under the NPT and which weapons-related activities should be voluntarily abandoned.⁵⁵ The first category would include tying a state's stockpiles of enriched uranium to its operational reactor capacity. In the second group would be computer modeling that "contributes to the design and development of a nuclear explosive device," as outlined in the JCPOA.⁵⁶ These practices are not explicitly banned under the NPT or the IAEA's Model Additional Protocol.⁵⁷

The Europeans should work closely with China and Russia as well as regional partners and international institutions like the IAEA to establish these wide-ranging standards among the Gulf's nuclear newcomers. Admittedly, this may be precisely what Russia tried to avert by introducing a clause into the JCPOA stipulating that all of the agreement's "provisions and measures . . . should not be considered as setting precedents for any other state."⁵⁸ However, it would be for countries to decide voluntarily to accept such limits, whether or not a precedent exists.

Rather than letting the JCPOA be dismantled by U.S. and Iranian obstinacy and regional tensions, the Europeans should generalize the agreement's basic elements in their regional nonproliferation policies. The Europeans could work through the Nuclear Suppliers Group—a network of nuclear-capable countries that include all twenty-seven EU member states, the European Commission, and the UK—to incorporate elements of the JCPOA into their export control standards for nuclear materials and technology.

Ideally, the existing safeguards under the NPT and a universally applied Additional Protocol, plus a number of collectively agreed limitations in the JCPOA, could form an enhanced verification benchmark—a new platinum standard of nonproliferation. This would also address wider concerns over the deal's sunset clauses. Policymakers in Washington, in particular, and in regional Arab capitals and Tel Aviv fear that the 2015 agreement's time limits would allow Iran to speed up its nuclear program over the coming years.⁵⁹ Applying these provisions to all Gulf countries even after they expire under the JCPOA would alleviate anxieties over Tehran's ultimate ambitions.

Talks About Regional Talks

The Europeans should explore options for a regional security dialogue to provide channels for conflict deescalation and confidence building. If limited to the Gulf, therefore excluding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Syria, regional cooperation could even be possible on security matters.

It is important, though, to distinguish the bold and fanciful from the practical and consequential. The goal should be to set up a loose regional security forum, rather than attempting to copy and paste the fifty-seven-member-strong Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) into the Gulf. That approach has sometimes been suggested in the past, in particular after the region was struck by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁰

The EU's credentials stretch back to the Helsinki process of East-West détente, which led to the founding of the OSCE's predecessor in 1975, and the Oslo process, which paved the way to a preliminary agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.⁶¹ The E3's early negotiation proposal for Iran in 2003–2004 contained working group formats that could be reapplied to today's relevant challenges.⁶²

Yet, neither the Arab states nor Iran currently views the EU as a serious stakeholder on regional security. European powers therefore have some convincing to do if they want their initiative to be successful.

The Europeans could build on a couple of tepid bilateral conversations held recently that could be regularized and structured at the regional level. In July 2019, the UAE sent a delegation to Tehran to talk about maritime security, and Riyadh has explored face-saving ways to end its disastrous intervention in Yemen.⁶³ These encounters have been possible despite a widely held view that Arab states would snub them for fear of appearing to give in to Iran.

There is, however, palpable pressure from the United States on its Gulf allies to refrain from any talks because Washington does not want to dilute its anti-Iran policy. At the same time, Arab trust in the U.S. security umbrella is at its lowest, given Washington's wavering response to the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil tankers and facilities.⁶⁴ And the killing of Soleimani highlighted the “unpredictability and uncertainty” of U.S. strategy, in the words of Carnegie's Yasmine Farouk.⁶⁵

To move from these talks to a broader dialogue, the Europeans could go through either the EU as an organization or individual member states—plus the UK—that have mediation potential in the region. If necessary, the Europeans could explore unofficial (track 2) or semi-official (track 1.5) dialogue before formalizing it. Such formats help establish a common understanding of security challenges.⁶⁶ They also allow the negotiating parties to explore what sets of issues to address, from political and security questions to nuclear technology and cooperation to energy and environmental matters.⁶⁷

Participants and Issues

All Gulf states should be part of such a dialogue.⁶⁸ Egypt and Turkey are swing states that should be consulted but not become members of the core group.⁶⁹ They do not belong to the Gulf region, and their inclusion would raise other, thornier issues, such as the wars in Libya or Syria. Israel, likewise, should not be part of the group—even if, counterintuitively, Iran may insist on it, either as a roadblock to talks or to see Israel submit to any agreed limitations. Involving Tel Aviv would bring bilateral Iranian-Israeli threat perceptions into a multilateral forum, where they would probably dominate much of the discussion.

China and Russia should be involved in any multilateral approach as permanent members of the UN Security Council and signatories of the JCPOA, as should the E3 and the EU itself. It could also be worthwhile to include Japan among the principal conveners. Not only is the country a major importer of Middle Eastern oil, covering nearly 90 percent of its crude consumption with imports from the region.⁷⁰ But involving Tokyo would also allow the United States to eventually join such talks more easily because, technically, such a format would not replicate the JCPOA setting. What is more, the U.S. president previously supported bilateral meetings between the Japanese prime minister and Tehran's leadership to kick-start a U.S.-Iranian dialogue.⁷¹

Countries like South Korea and India, which are major Gulf oil clients, should actively participate in relevant parts of such talks, for example on maritime security or—in the case of Seoul, which provides nuclear technology to the UAE—on nuclear safety.⁷²

The UN already provides an authoritative framework for regional talks on security matters. In addition to UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the JCPOA, Resolution 598 of 1988 to end the Iran-Iraq War is instructive. That resolution requested the UN secretary general to consult with Iran, Iraq, and other regional states to examine measures to enhance the Gulf's security

and stability.⁷³ Building on this document, which is still valid, the secretary general could appoint a special representative to immediately begin such talks. Iran and Russia have made Resolution 598 a starting point for their regional initiatives.⁷⁴

On substance, maritime security would be an obvious and important starting point for talks, given the Gulf states' shared body of water and a recent uptick in incidents at sea. However, it would also be a very politicized topic. The United States has enlisted Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as the UK, for its International Maritime Security Construct, a military mission to secure freedom of navigation in the Gulf. At the 2019 UN General Assembly, Iran proposed its own Hormuz Peace Endeavor, built on the four pillars of nonaggression, nonintervention, freedom of navigation, and energy security.⁷⁵ With two competing initiatives already in place, there is little room for compromise.

To begin with a less disputed issue, the eight countries should aim to adopt a Gulf charter based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This international agreement on nations' rights and responsibilities with respect to their use of the world's oceans counts 168 parties, including the EU. While Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are parties to the convention, Iran and the UAE have signed but not ratified it. Given the broad agreement on the substance, a strictly regional agreement should be possible. Progress should not be held up by principled arguments about which other countries—for example, the United States and Israel—have so far failed to adopt the convention.

Signing the obvious would still be an important symbolic gesture. And not only that: establishing protocols for dealing with incidents at sea is an important confidence-building measure. Once in place, following such procedures would directly contribute to mitigating tensions in the region.⁷⁶

Five Measures to Build Confidence

In the same vein of codifying previously announced positions, seemingly small confidence-building measures on a number of regional security issues would help lower tensions among the Gulf neighbors. Five such issues stand out on which the Europeans should encourage regional cooperation.

First, the Europeans should urge the Gulf states to agree on a regional test-ban agreement modeled on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which is not yet in force. All eight states are signatories to the NPT, and the three with a civilian nuclear program claim to pursue it only for

peaceful means. A regional test-ban agreement would substantiate this claim. As with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, there may be reasons for Iran and Saudi Arabia to withhold ratification of the CTBT, but these factors should not allow for a refusal at the regional level.⁷⁷

Second, given that most states in the region are parties to the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Europeans should ask the Gulf states to consider a regional agreement with enhanced safeguards on these two categories of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Such an agreement could form part of talks on the margins of the NPT review conference to be held by April 2021.⁷⁸

Third, building on Iran's declared 2,000-kilometer (1,243-mile) limit for ballistic missiles, the Europeans should press the Gulf countries to agree on a mutual ban on missiles with a greater range. This ban could be the foundation for further measures, such as launch notifications, inspections, and technical limitations that would include Iran's satellite launch program.⁷⁹

Fourth, in the field of conventional weapons, the Europeans should urge the eight Gulf states to sign and ratify the 2014 UN Arms Trade Treaty. This landmark accord, which regulates international trade in conventional arms, enjoys broad multilateral support: over 130 countries have signed it, and ninety-seven have ratified it, among them all twenty-seven EU member states and the UK. The Gulf, however, is a blank spot on the treaty's map, as only Bahrain and the UAE have signed, though not yet ratified, the accord.⁸⁰ The Europeans should coordinate to make their arms sales to the eight countries conditional on them drawing up a regional arms trade charter that embodies the UN treaty's essence.

Finally, once this arms trade charter is implemented, the Europeans should encourage the Gulf states to extend it into a regional agreement to ensure transparency about—or even set limits on—conventional weapons. Like the now-defunct Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty signed between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Warsaw Pact members in 1990, a Gulf conventional weapons treaty would oblige the parties to inform one another about equipment levels and military exercises and accept short-notice inspections.⁸¹ The states could complement this agreement with actual limits on certain arms categories. That would go a long way to defuse the simmering tensions around the Gulf.

All these would be reasonable first steps toward the more elusive and highly politicized goal of a nuclear weapons-free zone around the Gulf. Initially proposed in 2005 by the Gulf Cooperation Council countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, this idea has never gotten off the ground.⁸² A common security agenda is lacking, and threat perceptions diverge not

only between Iran and its Arab Gulf neighbors but also among the latter states.⁸³ Some observers, such as Carnegie’s Pierre Goldschmidt, have argued that the concept has proved “not only unrealistic but [also] counterproductive” to begin with.⁸⁴

Yet, such an agreement would reduce threat perceptions among the neighboring states and make a regional arms race—whether of conventional weapons or of ballistic missiles—less necessary. An accord is conceivable, given that the Arab states and Iran participated in a UN conference in November 2019 on establishing a wider zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMD in the entire Middle East.⁸⁵ This implies that there is already an Arab-Iranian consensus on the substance—at least on the issue of Israel’s suspected arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Politicking aside, a WMD-free zone emerging from these early steps would also involve outside powers through so-called negative security assurances. These are legally binding pledges by the five recognized nuclear-weapons states “to respect the status of the zones and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against treaty states-parties.”⁸⁶ This could prevent third parties from stationing nuclear weapons in the region or stop nuclear-armed vessels from traveling through it.⁸⁷

Depending on the details negotiated among the parties, this could mean the end of U.S. aircraft carriers sailing through the Gulf. This outcome, which would be highly attractive to Iran, would be difficult to achieve in the face of U.S. resistance. Whether Arab Gulf states would agree to such a zone regardless would depend on how much they still rely on U.S. military protection. At the same time, defusing tensions in the region through confidence- and security-building measures would be a powerful argument for Washington to lessen its footprint in the region to start with.⁸⁸

Note to the EU: Think Sovereignty

In his encounter with Iran’s foreign minister after the January 2020 escalation, the EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, spoke of the need for a “regional political solution.”⁸⁹ If that includes the broader approach described here—in terms of countries, issues, and EU willingness to back it up with incentives and disincentives—the union is on the right track.

The EU rightly keeps its distance from the U.S. policy of maximum pressure, both on principle and to remain a potential broker in the region. If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has shown that politics—particularly foreign policy—should not be blinded by ideology. As much as the Iranian

leadership was at least grossly negligent in refusing American help to combat the virus, the U.S. administration is culpable of exploiting a humanitarian disaster for the short-term goals of a failed policy by maintaining its blockade.

The breadth and depth of U.S. sanctions, including against allies, leaves the EU with few viable policy options. Now that the first INSTEX transaction is complete and the need for humanitarian trade is obvious, the Europeans need to ramp up the platform's volume. This is not only about defending the JCPOA but also about serving the Europeans' own interest by helping them become more independent of U.S. secondary sanctions in the long run. Europeans should extend the non-proliferation aspects of the JCPOA to the nuclear newcomers on the Arabian side of the Gulf.

What is more, the Europeans need to boldly wade into hard-security matters. Importantly, this is not merely about interstate security. As current events show, all countries in the region are affected by domestic developments in others—from protests in Iraq and Iran to royal infighting in Saudi Arabia. Instability in one state can easily spill over onto neighboring territory.

Proposing a dialogue among regional powers is more credible with a presence on the ground. This means that the French-led maritime mission in the Gulf should, over time, become an EU-mandated one. In addition, the Europeans should use their presence in Iraq—through the EU Advisory Mission in the country and individual states' contributions to the global coalition against the Islamic State—to engage in behind-the-scenes military deescalation next time it is needed. Formulating a regional approach would also delicately increase political dialogue among the three EU delegations in the Gulf—in Abu Dhabi, Kuwait City, and Riyadh—and the embassies of powerful member states and the UK in the region.

As well as developing a plan to engage Gulf countries, the EU needs to draw up a list of measures to bring its leverage to bear in case the states do not cooperate.

On Iran and its gradual noncompliance with the JCPOA, the union should work closely with the IAEA on measuring breakout time, issuing stronger policy language if needed, and undertaking more intrusive inspections. European states could recall their ambassadors for consultations, which would be an important sign of diplomatic disapproval. A further step would be to blacklist senior Iranian politicians and officials who are calling for an exit from the JCPOA or, worse, the NPT.

Difficult as it may seem, the EU has to work against blanket U.S. sanctions while at the same time reserving the right to issue its own targeted measures to signal its clear position to Iranian policymakers.

The EU and its member states, in coordination with the UK, should prepare responses to further regional escalation, whether by Iran or by other countries. Beyond a momentary recall of European ambassadors, this could mean drawing down embassy personnel, such as those working on trade relations or consular affairs, or reducing the level of diplomatic representation, for example from ambassador to chargé d'affaires. The EU and its member states could ban certain equipment that was crucial in enabling the incident that sparked a sanction; such incidents could include attacks on ships, infrastructure, or people. Likewise, the union could punish politicians and officials involved in escalatory actions by freezing their assets or imposing visa bans on them.

Any regional talks would be only the beginning of a process, not a move with a predetermined outcome that would give one party an advantage over another. Yet, precisely because the goal of a full-fledged collective security system for the Gulf appears unattainable, designing a process that could eventually lead there is crucial. Admittedly, such a process would aim to lessen tensions only in the Gulf, while challenges in other theaters—from Syria to Yemen to the broader Israeli-Iranian standoff—would remain unsolved.

Despite these caveats, merely beginning a regional dialogue would immensely help alter the current escalatory dynamics. This should encourage Iran to provide more details about its Hormuz Peace Endeavor. And it should persuade Iran's Arab neighbors to come up with actual demands toward Tehran by substantiating and negotiating on their claims of Iranian interference.

Ultimately, these proposals depend on the EU and its member states knowing what they want. If repeated calls such as French President Emmanuel Macron's desire for "European sovereignty" and von der Leyen's ambition of a "geopolitical [European] Commission" are to have any impact on the ground, the EU's policy toward Iran and the Persian Gulf would be a good place to start.⁹⁰

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