

IMAGINING A NEW SECURITY ORDER IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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For over three decades, the question of who controls the Persian Gulf has formed the basis for America's massive military buildup in the region. At the heart of the region's security dilemma is a clash of visions: Iran seeks the departure of U.S. forces so it can exert what it sees as its rightful authority over the region, while the Gulf Arab states want the United States to balance Iranian power.

Resolving this impasse will not be easy. But the Iranian nuclear agreement presents an opportunity to take a first step toward creating a new security order in the Gulf, one that could improve relations between Iran and the Gulf Arab states and facilitate a lessening of the U.S. military commitment.

The Case for a New Architecture

- The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a key pillar of the existing order, excludes Iran, Iraq, and external powers with a significant role in the region. Moreover, it does not provide a platform for dialogue on many security challenges or for reducing tensions, managing crises, preventing conflict, and improving predictability.
- A new and inclusive regional security dialogue would complement a U.S. regional strategy for balancing Iran. Iranian integration with regional structures could create opportunities to lower Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf while still allowing the United States to impose costs if Tehran continues behavior that threatens core American interests.
- A more stable security regime would lessen Gulf state dependence on U.S. military presence and create a balance of power in the region more favorable to U.S. interests.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- U.S. engagement in the region should elevate the priority of creating a new multilateral forum on Gulf security issues that includes the GCC countries, the United States, China, the European Union, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, and Russia. This forum should be the first step in realizing a long-term vision for a more formal, rules-based security structure.
- Creating an informal network that brings together technical experts to discuss transnational challenges is the most effective way to launch a new regional security dialogue, assuming there is sufficient buy-in from potential stakeholders, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- The United States should launch a diplomatic campaign in the fall of 2015 to gain consensus among prospective participants on a plan to move this initiative forward, with the goal of beginning exploratory conversations over the next six months.
- To give this initiative a boost, a senior U.S. official—the president or the secretary of state—should articulate a long-term security, political, and economic vision for the Gulf that includes a more effective regional security organization.

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