Pax Americana vs. Inclusive Security in the Middle East

By Trita Parsi

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Abstract: The Persian Gulf has long been considered as lacking the readiness for an inclusive security architecture. The political tensions both between Iran and the Arab states as well as between key Arab states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), combined with weak political institutions and a preference by GCC states to live under a US security umbrella, are believed to have undermined efforts by outside actors to encourage the creation of a new security architecture. However, this analysis misses a more profound structural challenge that the region suffers from: as long as the United States maintains a posture of dominating the region militarily, many regional states will be disincentivised to demand an inclusive security arrangement or develop readiness for it. For many of America's security partners, even a dysfunctional Pax Americana is preferable to the compromises that the creation of a security architecture inevitably would entail. This paper argues that only if the United States begins a military withdrawal from the Middle East and credibly signals its disinterest in sustaining hegemony can the preconditions for the creation of a successful security architecture emerge.

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Introduction

By all metrics, Pax Americana in the Middle East has failed. The region has progressively become more unstable and violent under US military hegemony. In 1998, the region suffered from five armed conflicts. By 2019, 22 violent struggles had engulfed the area.[1] This unadmirable result is perhaps not surprising. Though Washington ostensibly has been seeking stability, its policies do not appear to be centred around that objective. Rather than acting as an impartial arbiter, America's military presence in the region has been justified on the grounds of deterring, balancing and defeating "bad actors" – from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS) and Iran – frequently making the United States a direct belligerent in these conflicts. Over time, the entire organising principle of America's Middle East policy has morphed into "confronting Iran" regardless of the destabilising implications of this policy for the region. By imposing society-collapsing sanctions on non-compliant states while selling billions of dollars' worth of arms to its security partners, US hegemony has tended to exacerbate the very factors that have made the region unstable.

As Pax Americana withers away, the establishment of an inclusive security architecture for the Persian Gulf appears to be gaining ground. Even members of the Joe Biden campaign are promoting the concept, signalling a potentially significant shift in the thinking of America's mainstream foreign policy establishment.[2] Indeed, much of the resistance to the idea of a security architecture agreement has come from the United States itself, partly because of scepticism about the region's readiness for such an undertaking, and partly because of a reluctance to give up whatever semblance of control America's military domination of the area has provided the United States.

There is merit to the concern that the region as a whole exhibits insufficient readiness for this endeavour. Most of America's security partners in the Persian Gulf prefer that the United States continue to balance and contain their main rival, namely Iran. They have reacted angrily at any hint of a security arrangement that includes Iran and that reduces America's military commitment to the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, Tehran's vision of a security arrangement for the region appears to exclude the United States, which is a non-starter for most Persian Gulf states.

Nevertheless, focus on this apparent lack of readiness misses a more profound structural challenge: as long as the United States maintains a posture of dominating the region militarily, many regional states will be disincentivised to demand an inclusive security arrangement or develop readiness for it. For many of America's security partners, even a dysfunctional Pax Americana is preferable to the compromises that the creation of a security architecture inevitably would necessitate. Only if the United States begins a military withdrawal from the Middle East and credibly signals its disinterest in sustaining hegemony can the preconditions for creating a successful security architecture emerge.

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[1] Therése Pettersson and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence, 1989-2019", in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (July 2020), p. 597-613, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320934986.
[2] Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East", in *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126062.

1. An idea whose time has come

Conventional wisdom holds that US forces in the Middle East in general, and the Persian Gulf in particular, make America and these regions more secure. In reality, US military dominance of the area, as well as voluminous arms sales and support for repressive regimes, drive instability.[3] The region has been the epicentre of the overreach of US power, the unwarranted taking of sides in local and regional conflicts and a loss of vision about where US interests lie. This has been a systemic problem in US foreign policy in the Middle East since at least the end of the Cold War – it is not limited to any specific administration.

To date, America's war on terror – which vastly expanded its military presence in the Middle East – has cost 6.4 trillion US dollars.[4] The single costliest instance of US overreach in the region, the war in Iraq that began in 2003, cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties, thousands of American deaths and trillions of dollars in expenditures, to say nothing of the political harm the invasion caused.[5] It did not produce even remotely comparable benefits. The negative longer-term consequences of the US-led invasion include triggering an extended civil war, stimulating sectarian conflict inside and outside Iraq, causing massive refugee flows and producing the conditions for the emergence of ISIS.[6]

The existing approach to the Middle East is driven by flawed assumptions about the utility of coercive power in two arenas long considered central to US interests: countering terrorism and protecting oil markets. Contrary to Washington's conventional wisdom, terrorism is not an existential threat to the United States. It is receiving disproportionate attention given the actual danger it poses.[7] Nor do terrorists need to hold territory to be able to operate. This false assumption prompted the invasion of several Middle Eastern countries to deny terrorist organisations "safe havens". Washington also falsely believed that military interventions could contain terrorist threats, whereas in reality the US military presence and operations abroad are the foremost drivers of anti-US terrorism. Another crucial mistake has been Washington's strategy of centring counterterrorism on war. Most terrorist organisations are defeated not by military operations but by police and intelligence actions and cooperation. With few effective military targets, the main harm of such operations is that they inevitably inflict collateral damage on innocent civilians, which becomes another source of anger and resentment that feeds extremism and still more terrorism.[8]

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[3] For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Paul Pillar et al., "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination", in *Quincy Papers*, No. 2 (July 2020), https://quincyinst.org/?p=2924.

[4] Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post–9/11 Wars through FY2020: $6.4 Trillion", in *Costs of War Project Papers*, 13 November 2019, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2019/united-states-budgetary-costs-and-obligations-post-911-wars-through-fy2020-64-trillion.

[5] Heidi Garrett-Peltier, "War Spending and Lost Opportunities", in *Costs of War Project Papers*, 26 March 2019, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2019/war-spending-and-lost-opportunities.

[6] Petter Nesser, "Jihadism in Western Europe after the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq war on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2006), p. 323-342.

[7] By comparison, climate change causes 400,000 deaths globally each year, while terrorism caused less than 16,000 deaths in 2018. James Goldgeier and Bruce W. Jentleson, "The United States Is Not Entitled to Lead the World", in *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126476.

[8] Paul Pillar et al., "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East", cit., p. 13.

Oil is the other factor. The roughly 55,000 US troops currently stationed in the Persian Gulf are partly there to protect the oil – a task the United States has taken on itself since 1980 when President Jimmy Carter promulgated the Carter Doctrine. As time has passed, the United States has reduced its dependence on Persian Gulf oil but has continued to shoulder the cost of "protecting" the commodity. In 2018, the United States spent approximately 81 billion US dollars protecting global oil supplies; this represented 13 per cent of the Defence Department's base budget for the year.[9] Still, that same year only 15 per cent of America's petroleum imports came from the Persian Gulf.[10] In contrast, 40 per cent of China's oil imports are from the Middle East, while 76 per cent of the oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz in 2017 went to Asian markets more broadly.[11] While it is not sustainable for the United States to continue to shoulder the full cost of protection, there are also question marks as to whether the US military's presence has contributed to the stability of oil supplies or the stability of oil markets. Consequently, justifying the current US force posture in the Persian Gulf on the basis of protecting oil supplies and keeping markets stable is precarious at best.

Given the manifest failure of the current strategy, growing calls for a demilitarised approach to the region should be no surprise. Nor should the American people's war fatigue and increasing demands for these endless wars to be ended. Indeed, firmly shifting attitudes among the American electorate render the continuation of Pax Americana in the Persian Gulf challenging to sustain. A very small minority of Americans, roughly around 20 per cent, believe that the United States should intervene militarily to stop human rights abuses overseas. A majority are sceptical of humanitarian intervention and prefer that the United States first focuses on America's "own domestic human rights problems such as mass incarceration and aggressive policing". Even a majority of Donald Trump supporters hold this view, according to a poll by the Eurasia Group Foundation.[12]

Moreover, the poll shows that American exceptionalism – an intellectual precondition for the idea of benign American hegemony – is fast losing support among Americans, particularly the younger generation. More than half of 18- to 29-year-olds believe America "is not an exceptional nation" (the generational gap here is stark – only a quarter of Americans over the age of 60 reject American exceptionalism).[13]

Other polls have confirmed these trends. A Charles Koch Institute poll shows that only 7 per cent of the American populace favours a more militarily active foreign policy, while a plurality, 48 per cent, think the United States should be less militarily engaged in the world. Not surprisingly then, about three-quarters of US adults support bringing troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than six times as many Americans support rather than oppose the

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[9] Securing America's Future Energy (SAFE), "The Military Cost of Defending Global Oil Supplies", in *SAFE Issue Briefs*, 21 September 2018, https://secureenergy.org/?p=4027.
[10] Robert Rapier, "How Much Oil Do We Import from the Middle East?", in *Forbes*, 7 January 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2020/01/07/how-much-oil-do-we-import-from-the-middle-east.
[11] Justine Barden, "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint", in *Today in Energy*, 20 June 2019, https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932.
[12] Mark Hannah and Caroline Gray, *Diplomacy & Restraint. The Worldview of American Voters*, Eurasia Group Foundation (EGF), September 2020, p. 4, https://egfound.org/?p=705.
[13] Ibid.

Trump administration's recent agreement with the Taliban. Perhaps most importantly, these numbers do not change dramatically between Trump and Biden supporters.[14]

Promises to end America's endless wars are now heard on all sides of the political configuration in the United States. Nearly all Democratic primary contenders promised to end these wars during the 2020 primary, and many vowed to bring home all combat troops from the Middle East.[15] Similarly, Trump distinguished himself from the other Republican primary candidates back in 2016 by slamming the decision to go to war in Iraq and presenting himself as the anti-war candidate. While many thoughts this would be a losing proposition, it proved crucial to his electoral success.[16]

These factors have helped make a security architecture for the Persian Gulf an old idea whose time has arrived. Biden advisors Jake Sullivan and Daniel Benaim have correctly pointed out in *Foreign Affairs* that the Middle East remains the "most dangerously underinstitutionalized region".[17] Without any inclusive regional bodies responsible for managing, containing and at times resolving the region's many quarrels while also checking regional rivalries and preventing them from turning violent, the instability that has come to characterise the region is somewhat of a foregone conclusion.

2. Pax Americana vs. inclusive security

While Washington is warming up to the idea of an inclusive security architecture, circumstances in the region remain problematic. Though the conditions and norms necessary to make a security arrangement successful and durable are largely missing, most of these cannot be expected to exist prior to constructing this architecture. Rather, they will come into existence through the deliberations that establish the new security arrangement. For instance, norms such as non-interference in other states' internal affairs or a taboo against the pursuit of regime-change in neighbouring countries are notoriously weak in the Middle East. Similarly, virtually all major powers in the region engage in funding and supporting armed non-state actors in other countries, though few as extensively and successfully as Iran.

The strengthening of norms of non-interference cannot constitute preconditions for the pursuit of a new security architecture. Instead, the adoption or strengthening of these norms should be on the agenda, together with mechanisms to regulate and limit military build-up and expenditures, as the security arrangement is negotiated. Such an arms control component of the agreement would have to address ballistic missiles as well as the use of paramilitary groups.

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[14] Rebecca Kheel, "Poll: About Three Quarters Support Bringing Troops Home from Iraq, Afghanistan", in *The Hill*, 6 August 2020, https://thehill.com/node/510851.

[15] Robert Burns, "Campaign: Warren's Call to Exit Mideast Means Combat Troops", in *AP News*, 15 October 2019, https://apnews.com/article/63a265c232cd4b9e9d70d86f9b34de42.

[16] Andrew Prokop, "Donald Trump Issued a Remarkably Blunt Denunciation of the Iraq War during the Debate", in *Vox*, 16 December 2015, https://www.vox.com/2015/12/16/10296032/donald-trump-gop-debate-iraq-war; J.D. Vance, "Why Trump's Antiwar Message Resonates with White America", in *The New York Times*, 4 April 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trumps-antiwar-message-resonates-with-white-america.html.

[17] Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East", cit.

Other necessary changes in the conduct of Persian Gulf states do not pertain to particular activities but rather to the very conception of security and the principles for ordering the region. A common perspective in Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is to divide the region between Arab and non-Arab states. Critical statements of Iran and Turkey often focus on their alleged interference in *Arab* affairs. "The Turkish interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries is a clear example of negative interference in the region", the UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash recently charged.[18] The Saudi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf and other Saudi officials regularly make similar charges about Iran. "One of the most dangerous forms of terrorism and extremism is what Iran practises through its blatant interference in Arab affairs", al-Assaf told the Arab League.[19]

The emphasis on *Arab affairs* may appear benign but has profound implications. It suggests that Saudi Arabia – which kidnapped the Lebanese prime minister in 2017, has helped caused what the United Nations calls the worst humanitarian disaster in the world in Yemen, intervened militarily in Bahrain to crackdown on dissidents, and was on the verge of invading Qatar to overthrow its government – can engage in these activities legitimately by virtue of its ethnic Arab makeup.[20] On the other hand, Turkey and Iran are, by definition, illegitimate actors by virtue of their non-Arab composition (going forward, Riyadh may have to make an exception for Israel which otherwise would fall into the same category as Turkey and Iran). A shared history, cultural ties, borders and trade do not provide avenues for influence (positive or negative), only the ethnic identity of the state does. While such a racist division of the region may serve Saudi Arabia's bid for regional leadership by disqualifying its non-Arab rivals by default, the refusal to recognise the legitimacy of other states based on ethnicity is not conducive to the creation of an inclusive security arrangement. Iran's refusal to recognise Israel presents a similar dilemma.

These conceptions add to the reluctance on the part of some Persian Gulf states to support an inclusive security architecture for the region. For many of these states, the continuation of Pax Americana offers a far more attractive option: the United States tips the regional balance in their favour, affords them a security umbrella, contains and weakens their regional rivals, evades any need for compromise with their regional foes, all the while handing the bill to the American taxpayer. In the words of former Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, the Saudis want to "fight the Iranians to the last American".[21] Binding the United States to their own security and political ambitions has, as a result, been imperative. These states watch with

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[18] David Hearst, "A New Message Resounds in the Arab World: Get Ankara", in *Middle East Eye*, 12 September 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/185006.

[19] Sami Aboudi, "Tunisia Says It Will Coordinate Arab Response to U.S. Move on Golan", in *Reuters*, 29 March 2019, https://reut.rs/2HNWJlY.

[20] Rebecca Kheel, "Saudi Crown Prince Jokes about Kidnapping Lebanese Leader", in *The Hill*, 24 October 2018, https://thehill.com/node/412930; Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest", in *The New York Times*, 14 March 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html; Andrew England, "World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis Deepens as Coronavirus Hits Yemen", in *Financial Times*, 10 April 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/507d62b9-7d11-438c-805a-09cffff6d69b; Alex Emmons, "Saudi Arabia Planned to Invade Qatar Last Summer. Rex Tillerson's Efforts to Stop It May Have Cost Him His Job", in *The Intercept*, 1 August 2018, https://interc.pt/2LF3oRw.

[21] Marc Lynch, "Gates: Saudis Want to Fight Iran to the Last American", in *Foreign Policy*, 1 December 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/01/gates-saudis-want-to-fight-iran-to-the-last-american.

trepidation the shifting of political winds in Washington away from the United States acting as a world policeman and sustaining an infrastructure of more than 800 military bases worldwide. "Bringing the troops home" is tantamount to a call to abandon America's Persian Gulf security partners, in their view.

Their harsh reactions to any sign or measure that seemingly could weaken Washington's commitment to their security and ambitions are revealing. Saudi Arabia and the UAE (along with Israel) viewed the 2015 Iran nuclear deal -– officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – less as an arms control agreement and more as a measure that would allow the United States to pivot to Asia and cease its three-decades-old role as the balancer of Iran. American officials were baffled to hear some Arab officials view the agreement as a first step towards abandoning the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf in favour of a renewed US–Iran alliance, akin to what existed during the time of the shah. After all, the agreement would both end Iran's political and economic isolation and terminate Washington's policy of containing Iran. The nuclear details or implications of the deal were not their primary concern.[22]

These Saudi and Emirati fears have not been limited to the presidency of Barack Obama, under whose watch the JCPOA was negotiated and concluded. President Trump, who otherwise has taken American deference towards these autocratic regimes to new levels, has further intensified nervousness in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi about America's commitment to their security. Two events in the summer and fall of 2019 confirmed their fears.

After a tense summer with mysterious attacks against oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, most likely at the hand of Iran, Tehran shot down an American spy plane it claimed had entered its airspace. At first, Trump approved strikes against targets in Iran in retaliation, but reversed his order at the last moment and instead directed a cyber-attack against Iran. The reversal stunned the world as well as America's security partners in the region. John Bolton, the hawkish National Security Advisor and ardent supporter of war with Iran, was left devastated by Trump's decision.[23] Three months later, a spectacular drone attack against Saudi refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais in the eastern part of the country disrupted more than half of Saudi Arabia's oil production for several weeks. Though a UN investigation could not confirm Iran's involvement in the attack, Saudi officials had no doubts about the identity of the culprit and expected the United States to come to their defence.[24]

But once again, Trump showed little interest in starting a war with Iran on behalf of the Saudis, causing Middle East officials and much of the Washington foreign policy establishment alike to accuse him of having abandoned the Carter Doctrine.[25] But rather than the Middle East

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[22] Trita Parsi, "John Bolton Can Stomach Kim Jong Un's North Korea, but Not Iran", in *Foreign Policy*, 25 June 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/25/bolton-book-netanyahu-pompeo-undermine-us-iran-interests-israel-saudi-arabia. For additional details, see Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy. Obama, Iran and the Triumph of Diplomacy*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2017.

[23] John Hudson, "Diverging Worldviews Long Haunted Trump-Bolton Relationship", in *The Washington Post*, 10 September 2019, https://wapo.st/2UMvnjq.

[24] "Saudi Arabia Oil Attacks: UN 'Unable to Confirm Iranian Involvement'", in *BBC News*, 11 December 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50742224.

[25] Hal Brands, Steven A. Cook and Kenneth M. Pollack, "RIP the Carter Doctrine, 1980-2019", in *Foreign Policy*, 13 December 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/15/carter-doctrine-rip-donald-trump-mideast-oil-big-think.

descending into chaos, as proponents of Pax Americana had predicted, Persian Gulf states began exploring regional diplomacy.[26] Recognising that the US military was no longer at their disposal, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began exercising diplomatic options they had earlier shunned. Saudi officials quietly reached out to Iran via intermediaries seeking ways to ease tensions. Tehran, in turn, floated a peace plan based on a mutual Iranian-Saudi pledge of nonaggression. Riyadh also stepped up direct talks with Houthi rebels in Yemen as a way to ease tensions with their backer, Iran.[27]

Abu Dhabi went even further. The UAE started withdrawing troops from Yemen and opened direct talks with Tehran over maritime security. It even released 700 million US dollars in funds to Iran in contradiction to the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy.[28] While the calculation behind these measures might have been tactical, it is nevertheless noteworthy that as the United States appeared poised to back out of the region, its erstwhile allies tilted toward diplomacy. The Saudis and Emiratis simply had no choice but to cease their rejection of diplomacy because they could no longer operate under the protection of the United States. With the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, however, the pendulum once again swung in the direction of confrontation and away from diplomacy, courtesy of American military intervention.

These developments suggest that Saudi and Emirati opposition to an inclusive security architecture can be amended. As long as the United States remains committed to intervening in the region militarily, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi tend to prefer a confrontational posture that aims to direct US power towards weakening and defeating Iran. Once Washington convincingly demonstrates its disinclination to get involved in an armed confrontation with Tehran, the Saudis and Emiratis adjust accordingly and begin exploring diplomacy to secure their interest through more peaceful coexistence with their northern rival. Consequently, openness to and readiness for an inclusive security architecture appears only to emerge once the United States clearly has abandoned all ambitions to dominate the Persian Gulf.

The recent normalisation agreement between Israel and the UAE is best understood in this context. It is not so much a peace deal as it is an arms deal – and an implicit defence pack. The UAE gets access to the United States' most advanced fighter jet, the F35, in return for normalising relations with Israel while further binding the United States to the security of Abu Dhabi. Arab states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have long treated American weaponry purchases as informal defence arrangements that oblige the United States to

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[26] Hal Brands, "How to Make the Middle East Even Worse? A U.S. Withdrawal", in *Bloomberg*, 9 October 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-10-09/how-to-make-the-middle-east-even-worse-a-u-s-withdrawal; Trita Parsi, "The Middle East Is More Stable When the United States Stays Away", in *Foreign Policy*, 6 January 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/06/the-middle-east-is-more-stable-when-the-united-states-stays-away.

[27] Declan Walsh and Ben Hubbard, "With U.S. Help No Longer Assured, Saudis Try a New Strategy: Talks", in *The New York Times*, 26 December 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/26/world/middleeast/saudi-iran-qatar-talks.html; Benoit Faucon, Summer Said and Warren P. Strobel, "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Ease Tensions With Iran", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-to-ease-tensions-with-iran-11576178194; Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War", in *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html.

[28] "UAE Releases $700m of Iranian Funds", in *Middle East Monitor*, 21 October 2019, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191021-uae-releases-700-million-of-iranian-funds.

protect them militarily. Of course, positioning the Emirati-Israeli accord as an anti-Iran move also reinforces America's status-quo military commitment to the Middle East. (Indeed, the notion that the threat from Iran is so overwhelming that it compelled the UAE to strike a deal with Israel is belied by the fact that Abu Dhabi is far more embroiled in countering Ankara's regional ambitions and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Emiratis define as their primary political enemy.)[29]

Iran, in turn, poses a different set of challenges. Its official position is for the United States to exit the region altogether. A security architecture should be created and sustained by the Persian Gulf alone, Tehran maintains. To the other states in the Persian Gulf, this is a non-starter for the very reason Tehran finds it preferable: with the United States removed from the Persian Gulf, the path will open for Iran to become the dominant power in these waters (as it was during the time of the shah.) Mindful of the Persian Gulf's importance to the global economy, Tehran has little choice but to accept a role for outside powers in any inclusive security architecture. Getting to this point may prove less arduous than Iran's official statements suggest, as senior Iranian officials privately concede that the architecture will have dim chances of success without the support and approval of the United States and possibly other permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, the proposition has not been tested since a serious effort at creating an inclusive security arrangement has yet to be undertaken.

3. A truly inclusive security architecture

The vital initial issues that Persian Gulf states need to agree on are whether to build on existing organisations and structures or set up an entirely new institution; the organisation's scope and ambition; and finally, its membership.

The Persian Gulf region is notoriously underinstitutionalised. Except for the GCC, there are no multinational security organisations. But building upon the GCC may be unwise, if even possible, as it suffers from numerous flaws. It was conceived as a defence pact against Iraq and Iran rather than an inclusive organisation with a cooperation-oriented mission and purpose. Its *raison d'être* has primarily been premised on the existence of an external threat that the member states unite against. Moreover, it is paralysed by its internal conflicts, primarily the stand-off between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their partners on the one hand, and Qatar on the other. The new security architecture has a better chance of succeeding if it instead is inspired by successful institutions arranging the security of other regions, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Though these are vastly different organisations, they are both inclusive and cooperation-oriented rather than premised on the need to balance a common threat. Moreover, by sidestepping the GCC, the new initiative will also evade much of its divisive baggage.

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[29] Trita Parsi, "The Israel-U.A.E. Deal Puts the 'Forever' in 'Forever War'", in *The New Republic*, 20 August 2020, https://newrepublic.com/article/159010/trump-israel-iran-mideast-forever-war.

In terms of scope and purpose, ASEAN's more soft-security focus – disaster relief cooperation and humanitarian assistance – might be an easier lift for the Persian Gulf states but will likely prove insufficient in the long run. The OSCE's all-encompassing approach – from confidence-building measures to human rights promotion to hard security issues – may be too ambitious at first. Still, it should be the organisation's long-term objective to promote cooperation on all of these issues. Combatting drug trafficking, pandemics, environmental issues, maritime security as well as pilgrimage security agreements are all challenges on which cooperation may be relatively forthcoming. Eventually, however, the region's hard security challenges must be addressed: defence expenditure, weapons acquisition, foreign bases, limits on ballistic missiles and the use and arming of militias, to name a few.

The composition of the new security organisation is another crucial issue. For the Persian Gulf states to have a sense of ownership, which is essential to the success of any such endeavour, they have to lead it themselves rather than relying on the United States or other major powers to drive it, although curtailing Washington's instinct always to seek to lead and control these mechanisms will be a challenge. At the same time, without buy-in and support from major powers, the regional powers will likely not be able to successfully negotiate the new security architecture. Including the United States risks pushing Iran to opt-out; not including the United States will compel most GCC monarchies to disengage.

The solution may lie in expanding external involvement beyond the United States. One option would be to provide observer status to all the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (the P5). This format would anchor the security architecture in the international system's existing structures and likely reduce objections and hesitation from all sides. Another option would be to anchor it in a combination of the P5, some EU member states in the form of "lead groups" and the Asian powers with the most significant stake in Persian Gulf security due to their dependence on its energy supplies. On the one hand, the coordination between the EU foreign policy institutions (e.g., the European External Action Service) and the so-called E3 – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – on the Iran nuclear file could represent a form of European involvement in and contribution to the new security organisation. Similarly, the E4 (E3 plus Italy) and EU coordination on Persian Gulf–related security matters offers another platform that could potentially be leveraged in this framework. On the other, India, Japan and South Korea (in addition to China) are the most significant importers of Persian Gulf gas and oil. Their own tensions and rivalries risk turning the Persian Gulf into an arena for their geopolitical competition in the coming decades. Including them in the security architecture can help strengthen the arrangement and dilute the role of both the US and China, while protecting the region from inter-Asian geopolitical rivalries.

Conclusion – A new role for the United States

The mechanics of getting the Persian Gulf states to engage this idea and eventually initiate and lead this effort are complex and beyond the scope of this paper. However, the regional powers are disincentivised even to develop an interest in moving in this direction as long as the United States remains committed to the idea of Pax Americana in the Persian Gulf. To credibly signal and demonstrate commitment to supporting the establishment of a new

security architecture and help develop the conditions that will incentivise regional states to invest in this strategy for peace and stability, the United States should take the following steps, all of which squarely lie in its national interest.[30]

Abandon the hegemonic approach. Few developments in the Middle East genuinely threaten America's core interests: protect the United States from attacks and facilitate the free flow of global commerce. Neither warrants a significant US military presence in the Middle East, let alone regional military dominance. Even preventing hostile domination does not mean the United States must play the role of hegemon itself, nor does it require the current level of US arms sales to America's strategic partners. Instead, Washington should appreciate that multipolarity precludes regional domination by any other state. This new approach would not disengage from the Persian Gulf, but would instead prioritise diplomatic and economic involvement over military hegemony, military interventions and arms sales.

End the Global War on Terror. The 19-year-old Global War on Terror is a failure. Preventing of all acts of terrorism or eliminating all groups identified as "terrorists" is neither imperative nor achievable. Reducing the risk and incidence of terrorist violence requires addressing the circumstances and issues that motivate people to resort to the tactic and provide the impetus for future terrorist groups to form. The current war on terror often aggravates these conditions. As Steven Simon and Richard Sokolsky have suggested, the United States should repeal and replace the existing Authorisations to Use Military Force from 2001 and 2002 that have repeatedly been used to authorise war without Congressional approval, significantly reduce forward-deployed counter-terrorism forces as well as targeted killings and drone strikes, and scale back partnership capacity building with strategic partners who use the training and resources for domestic repression under the guise of counter-terrorism.[31]

Talk to everyone. The United States' approach to the Middle East has often turned it into a belligerent rather than a balancer. In that process, it has isolated itself from important players in the Middle East and lacks relations with key states and actors, effectively ceding diplomatic manoeuvrability to Russia and others. US policy toward the Middle East must entail active engagement with all players in the region – friends and foes alike. This would include seeking normalisation with Iran and finding constructive ways to manage their differences.

Pursue diplomacy – not war – in Yemen and Syria. America should be part of the solution in Syria and Yemen by taking part in efforts to find political settlements to these two civil wars. In Syria, the United States should withdraw all troops in coordination with partner countries, including Europe, given that the original reason for their dispatch – to defeat ISIS – is now obsolete. The United States should declare a moratorium on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE until they cut off all support to parties to the Yemen conflict.

No more carte blanche for partners. Unconditional US support for partner countries has often disincentivised them from pursuing diplomacy to resolve tensions with neighbours. For

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[30] These recommendations are explained in detail in Paul Pillar et al., "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East", cit.

[31] Steven Simon and Richard Sokolsky, "19 Years Later: How to Wind Down the War on Terror", in *Quincy Papers*, No. 1 (June 2020), https://quincyinst.org/?p=2603.

instance, overt US backing of Saudi Arabia has often encouraged greater belligerence than when the Saudis have been less sure that the United States would intervene on their behalf. A significant reduction of US troops in the Middle East will help instil greater restraint and reduce the tendency toward destabilising behaviour among partner governments.

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In conclusion, America's hegemony in the Middle East is not only a failure, but it is also an obstacle to the establishment of a new security architecture. Though the region faces many challenges, and many conditions for a successful, durable and inclusive security arrangement do not yet exist, the readiness of regional states to demand such an architecture will not fully come into existence until Washington convincingly signals its intent to reduce troop levels in the region. While the United States should help regional states establish a new security architecture, it should not lead such an initiative or the effort to negotiate it. Regional buy-in and ownership of this process are essential; Persian Gulf states cannot own this process if Washington leads it. Ultimately, the security of the Persian Gulf must primarily rest on the shoulders of the states of the Gulf.

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