

MEDirections Annual Conference

Where do we start? Designing Steps Towards a Regional Security System in the Persian Gulf

European University Institute, Middle East Directions Programme, RSCAS, Florence

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Conference concept

Historical and theoretical framing

1. *The essential features of a future regional security system.* Looking back at the history of the region, one can identify several previous experiences of cooperative behaviour between rival countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. What were the specific contexts when these experiences emerged? And what led to the demise of cooperative attitudes? Why were they not sustainable? Is the conflicting nature of the current status quo the result of a systemic failure of the regional security system, and if so what are the main causes? Or does the systemic failure stem from actions by spoilers? What are the essential systemic requirements which would be needed to curb instability? Which of these elements should be deemed essential in a future restructuring of the security system?

2. *Building a rationale for cooperation.* There is little doubt that in the strategic calculus of nations in the Gulf region there are few incentives to talk with adversaries or peer competitors. Indeed, any 'security-building continuum' would only be successful if a persuasive rationale for entering regional dialogues existed. Why do states remain unwilling to undertake conciliatory behaviour in the heightened crisis environment in the region? What contributes to the increasingly high levels of mistrust? Is it fear of loss from dialogue or hopes of more gains from escalation? Would the fear of mutual destruction or mutual security vulnerability serve as plausible incentives to enter a cooperative phase? What should be done to construct a persuasive rationale for regional dialogues in the Persian Gulf region? What could be done to increase the focus of these countries on common interest issues?

Immediate military-security concerns

3. *Exploring Saudi-Iranian military threat reduction options.* Despite the continuing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, relations between the two countries in most of the period before 2015 were based on non-adversarial competition. The two states' perceptions of each other as main military threats are a relatively recent development. Investigating possible Saudi-Iranian

military threat reduction (MTR) options would be a path to reverse this trend, and would hopefully be helpful in de-escalating tensions. What challenges and opportunities lie in Saudi Arabia and Iran pursuing an MTR approach? What steps need to be included and how can they be started? How could a process of incremental steps lead to an institutionalised channel of communication between the two countries with dispute resolution mechanisms?

4. Responding to US-Iran military escalation. The existing escalatory trend between the US and Iran involves a high risk of a military clash, including the outbreak of an inadvertent war due to the formation of mature military 'contact zones' in both the Strait of Hormuz and Iraq. What actions can be taken to reduce the scope and density of existing military 'contact zones' between Iran and the US? What solutions exist to minimise the risk of an unwanted military clash produced by incidents or miscalculations? Experts suggest establishing a de-confliction line with a direct confidential communication line, while others suggest a military hotline facilitated by a third party. What are the pros and cons of each proposal? What has blocked their political endorsement and what could be done to revive them? What other innovative approaches might be adopted?

Economic and development diplomacy

5. From coercive to cooperative economic diplomacy. During the 1997-2008 GCC-Iran rapprochement, growth in economic ties was an integral part of political de-escalation, which constructively helped ease tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. However, in the last decade the US sanction regime has undermined possible economic cooperation at the regional level and substituted it with economic disengagement as a way to gain leverage. In this context, with no immediate change of policy in sight, the prospects for conventional economic cooperation based on potential mutual interests in boosting trade and investment seem limited. How should economic diplomacy be initiated while a disengagement strategy at the political level is followed? Are there alternative ways to use economic tools and incentives to end the zero-sum game? Is there a space for 'development diplomacy' and for reconstruction tools to play a role?

Religious diplomacy

6. Exploring the potential of religious talks. Religious talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia over pilgrimages are an indispensable part of relations between the two countries and have historically acted as barometers of tensions between them. Even in high-tension times, talks over the *Haj* have continued and only stopped when relations have entered a collision course. Since 1943, the Haj has only been interrupted on three occasions. Indeed, in recent years Haj diplomacy has acted as the only official diplomatic channel between the two countries. Could this provide an unexplored venue for broader talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia? In what ways could religious diplomacy positively impact the existing political deadlock? How could it lead to broadening cultural connections, and thus contribute to easing mutual threat perceptions?

Diplomacy on basic human needs

7. *Fostering a regional dialogue on environmental threats and food and water security.* The Persian Gulf region is faced with mounting environmental threats, like massive water pollution, climate change, desertification and challenges to biodiversity, which might turn into systemic risks for the individual countries and for overall regional stability. At the same time, the water-food nexus is adding to future risks of instability. Addressing such issues will necessarily require multilateral approaches. How can environmental degradation come to be perceived as a common threat requiring concerted regional actions? How could existing platforms like the Kuwait Regional Convention for Co-operation on Protection of the Marine Environment and other international agreements be employed to foster regional dialogue? What steps should be taken to integrate the water-food nexus in regional dialogue?

Alternative channels

8. *Toward a multilateral approach to mediation.* The lack of direct engagement among conflicting actors in the Persian Gulf region has made power-brokering and international mediation a key necessity in building a new regional security system. However, as the region is receiving growing international attention, the extension of great power politics has complicated such a possibility. Russia and China are showing significant interest in Gulf politics while gaining new leverages over actors. However, they are reluctant to get involved in de-escalation attempts. At the same time, internal political dynamics among traditional mediators such as the EU and Oman have contributed to their leverage deficit, and therefore have negatively impacted their conflict resolution potential. How could international mediation adapt to an environment in which global actors are pursuing diverging national objectives? In what ways might Russia and China possibly engage in mediation initiatives? How could Europe build a more effective framework for mediation in the region in cooperation with the US, China and Russia?

9. *Revisiting Track-II dialogues.* Track-II and Track 1.5 have received attention as alternative paths to formal dialogue in the Middle East. They have mostly been perceived as unique contact lines in times when official political contacts have proven difficult. However, serious questions remain about their success, impacts and capacity to trigger Track I processes. What could be learned from these experiences to improve future Track-II and Track 1.5 initiatives in the Persian Gulf? What practical steps and new practices should be adopted in the years to come to raise the effectiveness of Track-II and Track 1.5 initiatives?