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Gulf Security: Looking for a Pragmatic Framework for a Fragmented Regional Order

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The Complexity of Gulf Regional Security

The challenge of developing a durable and inclusive regional security framework in the Gulf is compounded by the complexity of the region's evolving threat environment. Gulf security is shaped by interconnected dynamics, including state-to-state rivalries, missile and drone proliferation, maritime insecurity, cyber threats, and the persistent influence of non-state actors. These overlapping pressures, spanning domestic vulnerabilities, regional rivalries, and the external environment, including foreign intervention, create a strategic landscape in which risks are deeply interconnected and difficult to compartmentalize. This multi-layered complexity means that long-term stability depends on careful coordination across national, regional, and international levels.

As a result of the challenges listed above, efforts to enhance regional cooperation and explore alternative approaches to collective security have remained gradual and uneven. Existing mechanisms, whether through GCC frameworks, external dialogues, or issue-specific coalitions, have faced limitations stemming from differing threat perceptions, varying national priorities, and the broader complexity of regional and external geopolitics. As a result, many initiatives have struggled to evolve into more comprehensive and institutionalized arrangements.

Within this context, the question of external guarantees continues to play an important role. The United States remains a key security partner, yet it is unlikely to provide the kind of formal, binding, treaty-level guarantees that some Gulf states may seek. Domestic political considerations, strategic fatigue, and a broader shift toward burden-sharing have shaped Washington's approach toward future commitments in the region. GCC states, meanwhile, have themselves increasingly



pursued strategic autonomy, seeking to broaden international partnerships while maintaining longstanding relationships with the United States.

Other major powers are unlikely to bridge this gap. China, despite its growing economic engagement, has shown limited willingness to assume the role of a direct security guarantor, prioritizing stability, non-interference, and economic cooperation over military commitments. Russia, meanwhile, faces constraints, and its current geopolitical posture limits its credibility as a long-term security partner for the Gulf. Europe, while an important diplomatic and economic actor, remains fragmented on security policy and lacks the political cohesion to serve as a comprehensive security guarantor in the region.

Taken together, these shortcomings highlight a central reality of the Gulf's security environment: Long-term stability cannot be outsourced and is unlikely to be delivered by external actors alone. Instead, solutions must increasingly emerge from within the region, anchored in Gulf-led initiatives that emphasize dialogue, confidence-building measures, and pragmatic cooperation among regional stakeholders. This points to the need for a process-led approach that prioritizes incremental engagement, institutionalized communication channels, and regionally owned mechanisms capable of managing crises and reducing escalation over time.

Approaches to Gulf Security and Their Limitations

Several approaches have shaped Gulf security debates, including confidence-building models, issue-specific cooperation frameworks, and deterrence-based arrangements anchored in external partnerships. While each offers tools for managing risk, all suffer structural shortcomings that have prevented them from evolving into comprehensive and sustainable regional security arrangements.

Confidence-Building and OSCE-Inspired Process Models



The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-inspired approaches emphasize gradual confidence-building, transparency, and dialogue as a means of managing mistrust and reducing escalation without requiring formal alliances. In the Gulf, however, unresolved conflicts, asymmetric military capabilities, and the absence of a shared regional security identity have limited the effectiveness of such models beyond selective and incremental measures.

Maritime De-Escalation and Strait of Hormuz Frameworks

Maritime security initiatives, particularly in and around the Strait of Hormuz, have emerged as pragmatic entry points for cooperation centered on freedom of navigation, crisis communication, and incident prevention. Their impact, however, has been constrained by persistent trust deficits, competing legitimacy claims, and fragmented external involvement, preventing tactical coordination from maturing into a broader security framework.

External Partnership and Deterrence-Based Models

Deterrence-based frameworks anchored in external partnerships have long provided Gulf states with reassurance, military capacity, and crisis containment mechanisms. Yet shifting geopolitical priorities, uncertainty over long-term commitments, and limited inclusivity mean that these arrangements cannot substitute for regionally owned processes capable of addressing structural sources of insecurity.

Toward a Process-Oriented Security Framework

Against this backdrop, efforts to establish a sustainable regional security framework in the Gulf are longstanding, reflecting decades of debate over how best to manage insecurity, escalation risks, and external intervention in one of the world's most strategically vital regions. This paper approaches Gulf regional security as a process rather than an institutional end state. It argues that durable arrangements are more likely to emerge through overlapping, modular frameworks aligned with core principles, sovereignty, non-interference, strategic autonomy, and



inclusivity, rather than through the creation of a single rigid security organization.

Within this process-oriented approach, externally supported cooperation mechanisms should be understood not as final solutions, but as enabling platforms that can operate in support of Gulf-led initiatives, support incremental confidence-building, and contribute to progress as broader political conditions for inclusive security dialogue continue to evolve.

To operationalize this approach, it is necessary to assess the principal models currently shaping Gulf security debates. In the absence of a single dominant architecture, a range of frameworks has emerged, both regionally driven and externally supported, each reflecting different assumptions about how stability can best be achieved. These models vary in scope, membership, institutional ambition, and the balance they strike between deterrence and dialogue. Rather than converging on a single blueprint, Gulf security discussions increasingly center on how different mechanisms may coexist and complement one another over time.

Taken together, these emerging security models suggest that the future of Gulf regional security is unlikely to be built around a single, unified architecture or one overarching institution. Instead, it is more realistic to expect security cooperation to develop through a modular, ecosystem-like structure composed of multiple overlapping mechanisms operating in parallel.

In this ecosystem, different arrangements would serve different functions. Some modules may focus on intra-GCC coordination, such as strengthening military interoperability or political consultation among Gulf states. Others may be oriented toward maritime security, addressing shared concerns such as threats to shipping lanes, piracy, or escalation risks in key chokepoints. Additional mechanisms may prioritize confidence-building measures, including communication channels, de-escalation frameworks, or limited issue-based cooperation with Iran and



other regional actors. At the same time, external partnerships, whether with the United States, Europe, or Asian powers, would continue to form another layer of the broader security environment.

The key challenge, therefore, is not choosing one framework at the expense of others, but rather, ensuring that these different components complement and reinforce one another, rather than fragmenting into competing tracks. The gradual expansion of security cooperation will depend on whether these mechanisms can collectively widen the space for sustained dialogue, build institutional trust over time, and establish shared norms of restraint and cooperation.

This incremental, modular pathway reflects the strategic realities of the Gulf. Given persistent geopolitical rivalries, uneven threat perceptions, and limited appetite for binding collective structures, Gulf security is more likely to rest on adaptable, flexible arrangements that can evolve pragmatically alongside broader political shifts. In this context, resilience will stem less from rigid institutional designs and more from a layered network of cooperative practices that can deepen gradually as regional conditions allow.

Despite their diversity, these proposals share a common challenge: translating conceptual agreement on the need for cooperation into workable, politically acceptable arrangements in a region marked by deep mistrust, asymmetric capabilities, unresolved conflicts, and competing external alignments. Efforts such as the GCC's adoption of its Vision for Regional Security in 2023, along with Strait of Hormuz initiatives such as Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), have underscored both the demand for cooperative security and the difficulty of moving from declaratory principles to operational mechanisms.

Equally unresolved remains the question of structure, whether regional security should be built through formal organizations with binding obligations, or through more flexible architectures grounded in gradual confidence-building and issue-specific cooperation. Central to this debate



is also the question of guarantees, namely, whether any external actor or collective arrangement can credibly support implementation over time.

Policy Recommendations: From Fragmentation to Managed Cooperation

Building on this process-oriented logic, the priority should be to advance pragmatic pathways toward managed cooperation, rooted in regional ownership and supported by flexible arrangements that reduce escalation risks over time.

Several policy directions follow:

1. Prioritize Confidence-Building Measures as Practical Entry Points

Regional efforts are more likely to succeed if they begin with operational, low-politics measures rather than ambitious institutional designs. Early steps could include strengthened crisis communication channels, transparency mechanisms around military exercises, and cooperative protocols for managing incidents at sea or in shared airspace.

2. Strengthen Gulf-Led Platforms While Expanding Regional Inclusivity

Gulf-originated mechanisms, including GCC-centered coordination, remain essential building blocks. Over the longer term, stability will require frameworks that gradually engage a wider set of regional actors, ensuring that cooperation does not remain confined to narrow sub-regional arrangements.

3. Calibrate External Partnerships While Reducing Reliance on Formal Guarantees

External partnerships will remain important, but they should be shaped in ways that reinforce regional agency rather than dependency. With binding treaty-level guarantees increasingly limited, Gulf states should focus on layered resilience, combining deterrence where necessary, dialogue where



possible, and practical mechanisms for escalation management in between.

4. Institutionalize Dialogue as a Long-Term Process

Gulf regional security must be understood as an evolving process rather than a fixed end state. The strategic objective should be to normalize sustained dialogue, embed cooperative norms, and expand the space for regional problem-solving over time.

Conclusion: Toward Sustainable Security Through Pragmatic Regionalism

The Gulf's security environment will remain marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and overlapping risks, despite repeated efforts to enhance cooperation. The central challenge has not been a lack of initiatives, but the difficulty of translating shared concerns into credible and durable security arrangements.

As external guarantees become less predictable and comprehensive, regional architectures remain elusive; this paper argues that sustainable security must increasingly be driven from within the region. A process-oriented, modular approach, built around incremental confidence-building, issue-specific cooperation, and calibrated external partnerships, offers a more realistic pathway than rigid, institution-heavy models.

Ultimately, stability in the Gulf is more likely to emerge through pragmatic regionalism: flexible, adaptive mechanisms that manage escalation, build trust over time, and reinforce regional ownership in an evolving strategic environment.

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