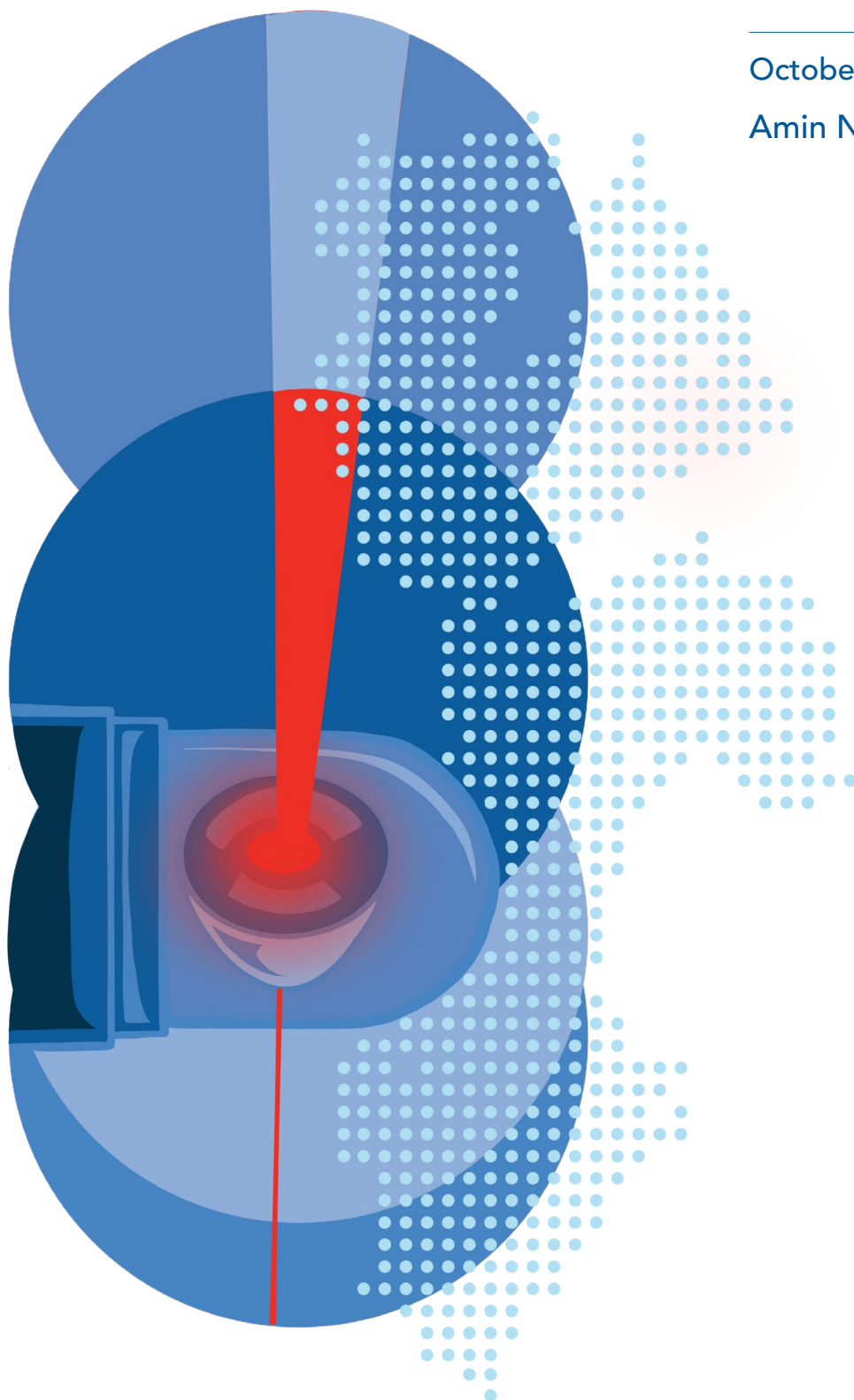




A SECTORAL TRUST-BUILDING APPROACH TO DE-ESCALATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF

October 2020

Amin Naeni



SUMMARY

The risk of war has become a major threat to all states of the Persian Gulf as political elites link security with the survival of their regimes. In fact, concern for survival provokes ideological disputes and conflicting interests among global and regional actors. Middle Eastern regimes pursue military capability-building, deterrence strategies, or ways to reduce the power of other states to mitigate fears of regime change. This has created a security dilemma and reinforced a power rivalry in the region. In fact, the region is characterised by distrust and fearmongering. In particular, the fear of regime change is the main root of conflicts. This policy paper proposes a bottom-up approach for decision-makers to build trust and regional cooperation to de-escalate tension in the region and improve security. Besides, in response to the current creeping escalation, this paper sheds light on how maritime cooperation has a profound potential to mitigate insecurity.


INTRODUCTION: THE DANGEROUS STATUS QUO IN THE GULF

The Persian Gulf is locked in a security dilemma. While some studies have focused on the role of religious factors, such as the Shia-Sunni conflict (Holtmann, 2014; Sluglett, 2016), other analyses underscore that religion is only an instrument to wield power (Sharifi-Yazdi, 2014). This paper argues that the fear of regime change is at the root of the region's insecurity, which escalates tensions and is the source of a common anxiety among all regimes of the region who strongly deem that the region is under a zero-sum game situation in which the rise of one state means the fall of another.

The fear of regime change has led major actors to compete for their own survival. In a bilateral relationship, this fear of elites declines through amassing more power. This dynamic can also lead to more repression and displays of military power which increases existing domestic and international tensions. In fact, it has created a cycle of insecurity. The dominance of fear versus positive policy-making has prompted investment in enhancing military capability and expanding influence beyond national borders. In this security dilemma, trust has been steadily declining among all states. In a critical regional rivalry region, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia perceive each other as threats as each state strives to gain power over the region. The two states have had a long history of conflicting interests in the region, and Iran's 1979 revolution added ideological disputes to the rivalry. Since that time, Riyadh sees Tehran not only as a rival but also a threat against legitimizing the Saudi ruling family, which seeks Tehran's ultimate overthrow (Rich, 2012: 427). Tehran, on the other hand, recognizes Saudi Arabia as a prominent ally of the U.S. who Tehran identifies as a significant threat vis-à-vis its survival (Soltaninejad, 2019:107).

Therefore, another issue is the discrepancy between Iran's and Saudi Arabia's perspectives (and other GCC countries) regarding the role of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf. Tehran sees the U.S. as the most consequential source of insecurity and the biggest threat against the survival of the Islamic Republic. In contrast to this, Riyadh recognizes Washington as a guarantor for the balance of power in the region and a crucial ally to protect the survival of Saudi Arabia. In this regard, leaders' fear of regime change has persuaded them to pursue the development of their military capability.

Between 2015 and 2019, Saudi Arabia was the world's largest arms importer. By the end of this period, its imports of major arms increased by 130 percent compared with the previous five-year period (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020). On the other hand, Iran has heavily invested in its domestic military programs, such as missiles, which sees as an essential means to ensure its survival; this has led to a severe crisis between Tehran and Washington.



Consequently, the current policy for maximizing power to maintain survival has escalated maritime disputes in the world's most important energy supply chain. Numerous maneuvers and military exercises are carried out every year as a result of which any miscalculation could quickly lead to a military escalation. While increasing military capabilities and deterrence capacities is logical for each state in a security dilemma situation, these strategies might lead to increasing tensions. However, there are actions that all regional actors could take to increase security through regional cooperation.

This paper presents a bottom-up approach to drawing a roadmap for trust-building in a region where uncertainty and lack of transparency among the Persian Gulf regimes currently drive foreign policy. While the maritime area is known as a source for the diffusion of tensions in the region, it can also be a site for trust-building exercises and the mitigation of fear of regime change. The bottom-up approach is based on a step by step plan that addresses non-sensitive political and military issues. Cooperation will start at the expert-level in bilateral talks to reach political elites on all sides.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DE-ESCALATION

Not all areas of regional dialogue need to be part of the aforementioned conflicts of interest; indeed, even today, many threats are common and outside of political and military sensitives such as environmental issues, counter-piracy, and human and drug trafficking. These common threats open possibilities for expert-level meetings and bilateral agreements between states that have lower level tensions such as Iran and Oman as well as Kuwait and Qatar.

The security dilemma has been overshadowed by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but there could be a chance for bilateral agreements with other states. Historically, decision-making in Arab states of the region largely depends on Saudi Arabia. However, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have their own concerns, so cooperation with Iran would be reachable. In this context, as the collaboration would be the result of expert-level meetings on non-sensitive issues, the leaders of Saudi Arabia need not perceive bilateral agreements with Iran as threats, and they do not blame other Arab states for reaching agreement with Iran. In fact, the non-political agreement has already proven successful even between Tehran and Riyadh, when the two countries reached the agreement for participation of Iranians in the annual Hajj ceremony in spite of profound political conflicts.

Therefore, this paper identifies five non-political areas: reducing environmental threats, countering trafficking, promoting maritime trade, encouraging tourism, and fostering academic cooperation. Environmental threats include water and air pollution between countries that have maritime borders as well as mismanagement of limited water resources, overfishing, waste generation, and marine ecosystems. The counter-trafficking agreements should concentrate on goods, drugs, and humans. Maritime trade should boost interdependence

among the countries as an effective way to earn trust. Tourism between countries cultivates cultural exchange and fosters positive public opinion towards each other. Although the states of the Persian Gulf region are under nondemocratic regimes, and personalized decision-making is in place of institutional decision-making, increased public interactions between people of these countries would impact policy-making of the elites in the long-term. And finally, academic cooperation between universities of these countries enables security cooperation. States can offer special scholarships for students from other countries of the region to create a multicultural environment and trust-building in educated youth as well as foster joint research projects.

To start reaching agreements, Iran should initiate negotiations with other states, because Tehran has been accused of expansionism by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, an attempt to sign the agreements with other states is an opportunity for Tehran to disprove what Washington and Riyadh believe. In this vein, Iran and Oman signed a shipping agreement in December 2019 in order to increase mutual trade. In addition, Iran and Qatar agreed to visa on arrival schemes for their respective nationals. This led to a growth of tourism between the two states by 150 percent in 2018 (Donya-e Eqtesad, 2018).

By improving cooperation on non-sensitive issues, bilateral and tripartite agreements should advance to multilateral deals. Such regional cooperation should also start with non-sensitive issues in which the consent of bilateral experience can help to generate trust in expert-level meetings. There is no precondition to achieving bilateral agreement among all sides to begin the multilateral discussion. However, the increase in the number of bilateral and tripartite agreements would reduce obstacles against multilateral compromise. To practice multilateral trust-building, all states should discuss expanding their bilateral agreements to all sides on the five aforementioned non-sensitive areas. To reach an effective and long-lasting agreement, working groups for the coordination and monitoring of the agreements should be established. If the cooperation faces challenges, working groups can provide a dispute settlement process.

A next step could be the preparation for the multilateral amelioration of political disputes. It could raise the level of meetings from experts to foreign ministers by creating a forum to discuss reducing political disputes gradually. As mentioned, the maritime cooperation would facilitate the decline of tension and eventually help to establish regime security. The forum should concentrate on counter-terrorism, joint patrols, and fighting arms smuggling, initially to reduce the fear of regime change in leaders' minds. In fact, it is the most difficult step because all actors have to reach an action plan to solve sensitive disputes. Hence, it demonstrates the importance of the previous steps, which empower some countries to play the role of the mediators to reduce mistrust between actors who are hostile towards each other. Oman, Kuwait, and even Iraq could be the mediators to provide consensus for dispute settlement.

However, it is a fact that these steps also engage global power interests, particularly the United States. Regardless of what regional actors think about its role, Washington's influence is undeniable. The U.S. will not lose its interests in one of the most strategic regions of the world, but this does not mean that it is willing to have an extensive presence in the Persian Gulf, at least because of expenditures and its willingness to focus on China. While disagreements over the U.S. presence can lead regional negotiations to a deadlock, a middle ground could break it.

The Islamic Republic's leaders have perceived the U.S.

as the main threat against their own survival for four decades, but there is no similar view about other global powers including the EU. It is a fact that the EU's credibility has reduced, where its efforts were not successful to maintain the benefit of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for Iran after the U.S. withdrawal. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize the EU as a major threat against its survival. Besides, the EU has not been a threat to the survival of Arab states of the region. Moreover, despite conflicting interests between the U.S. and Russia or China, the EU and the U.S. are old allies. Thus, the EU has a minimum required credit to play the role of mediator between all sides. In line with the EU, the UN can play an active role to choose a special representative to help in creation of the forum. The UN envoy can be from countries that have good relationship with all sides, such as Japan. In fact, when states reach agreements in non-sensitive areas, the UN and the EU should facilitate the participation of regional actors in a political forum.

Hence, the forum should discuss setting up a timetable to increase the role of regional actors. The discussion should focus on enabling regional actors to undertake the role of security provider by joint actions such as joint patrols. However, given the U.S. has defined its global role as guardian of the rule of law, it is not expected that the U.S. leaves the region completely. Although Iran has repeatedly demanded the departure of the U.S. from the Persian Gulf, under a win-win situation, Tehran would accept a multilateral agreement including the U.S., as the Islamic Republic did in the nuclear negotiations of 2015. While the JCPOA was a technical and political agreement in which step by step commitment was not feasible for all sides, marine cooperation has the potential to be implemented step by step. It provides an opportunity for regimes to reassess their benefit in cooperation, so Iran has more motivation to agree with it even despite the attendance of the U.S. in the forum.

Therefore, the EU and the UN, as largely neutral actors interested in de-escalation, should lead such a forum to increase cooperation in the maritime area. In this vein, an incidents-at-sea agreement, which the U.S. and the Soviet Union forged amid the Cold War, would be beneficial for the regional actors in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, a freedom-of-shipping agreement could also be discussed in the forum (Hunter, 2010). While the export of oil and gas is perceived as a means of



economic survival for the Persian Gulf regimes, the joint partnership of regional actors should increase their role in securing the energy supply chain and maritime trade. In early steps, the EU maritime mission would help to decrease Iran's concern about the U.S. role, and also

give a guarantee for Arab States. Another option is to invite military and political representatives to observe the maneuvers of each country to reduce anxiety regarding lack of transparency.

CONCLUSION

Since the fear of regime change and uncertainty are the primary roots of the security dilemma in the Persian Gulf, a bottom-up approach enables a road map of cooperation in non-sensitive areas. The step-by-step agreements should include bilateral ties between countries with low tension, multilateral regional actors, and engagement of global powers. This approach provides an action plan, it begins with experts' negotiations in non-sensitive areas and moves to political elites level in critical issues to reduce the fear of regime change. This paper attempts to focus on the non-political areas where success has been demonstrated. The cooperative approach should focus on reducing environmental threats, countering trafficking, promoting maritime trade, encouraging tourism, and fostering academic cooperation among all sides.

In fact, this paper offers five non-sensitive areas as a framework through which states practice cooperation to eventually ameliorate fear amongst them. In addition, this paper suggests the practical cooperation in the maritime realm such as joint patrols, counter-terrorism, and control of arms smuggling to ameliorate the fear of regime change among political elites to ultimately break free of the security dilemma. If decision-makers take action in the joint maritime partnership, it will provide an opportunity to settle on other sources of instability such as arms control in the long run. After trust-building in the maritime area, the forum will have the capacity to discuss arms control among influential actors with the active role of the UN and EU. In contrast, if the leaders of these regimes pursue the current policy in which military capability-building is perceived as a way to reduce threats, the Persian Gulf will move closer to war.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A bottom-up approach to trust-building could be achieved as follows:

- The riparian states of the Persian Gulf should start cooperation on non-sensitive issues (see below)
- In issue areas where multilateral agreements are not possible, two-step agreements, from bilateral to multilateral arenas are alternative and pragmatic approaches to achieve small steps even if not all are on the same page.
- The multilateral agreement should focus on five non-sensitive issues:
 - Reducing environmental threats from floods, desertification, water shortages, and extreme weather events
 - Countering illegal trafficking of narcotics and arms
 - Promoting maritime trade between the states in the Gulf
 - Encouraging tourism within the region
- Fostering academic cooperation and exchange within the region
- Discussions for this agreement should take place on an expert-level, whereas coordination and monitoring of the agreements should take place in joint working groups.
- A security forum on foreign minister level should be created:
 - Participation of all regional actors including the EU, the U.S., the UNSG office
 - The EU and the UN should act as mediators
 - Focus on joint patrol, counterterrorism, and arms smuggling
 - The forum should be supported by an EU maritime mission (in early steps)

- The forum should aim for an incidents-at-sea agreement, a freedom-of-shipping agreement, and a joint partnership of regional actors for securing the energy supply chain.

References

Donya-e Eqtesad (2018): Increasing Numbers of Iranian Visitors in Qatar; available at: <https://www.majiran.com/article/3827203> (last accessed 6.10.2020)

Hunter, Robert (2010): Building security in the Persian Gulf. RAND Corporation

Holtmann, Philipp (2014): A Primer to the Sunni Shia Conflict, in: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, (Lowell) 8 (1), pp. 142–145

Rich, Ben (2012): Gulf War 4.0: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the complexification of the Persian Gulf

Equation, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations: Reflections on the Arab Spring*, 23 (4), pp. 471–486

Sharifi-Yazdi, Farzad Cyrus (2015): Arab-Iranian Rivalry in the Persian Gulf: Territorial Disputes and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, I.B. Taurus

Sluglett, Peter John (2016): Deadly Implications: The Rise of Sectarianism in Syria in Beck M., Jung D., Seeberg P. (eds): *The Levant in Turmoil: Syria, Palestine, and the Transformation of Middle Eastern Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Soltaninejad, Mohammad (2019): Iran and Saudi Arabia: Emotionally Constructed Identities and the Question of Persistent Tensions, in: *Asian Politics & Policy*, 11 (1) pp. 104-121

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020): USA and France dramatically increase major arms exports; Saudi Arabia is largest arms importer, says SIPRI; available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says> (last accessed 5.10.2020)



Author:

Amin Naeni has worked on two projects with the University of Tehran in 2019 and 2020. His research has focused on the emerging role of Iran in the Middle East and the influence of the rivalry between Russia and the U.S. on Iran’s growing regional power. As a co-author, he has published papers with think-tanks, such as Brookings and Atlantic Council. He received his MA in Middle East and North Africa Studies from the University of Tehran in 2018.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Department for Middle East and
North Africa | Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:

Elisabeth Braune, Head, Department for Middle East and
North Africa

Referat Naher/Mittlerer Osten und Nordafrika

Tel.: +49-30-269-35-7420 | Fax: +49-30-269-35-9233

<https://www.fes.de/nahost>

To order publications:

Info.nahost@fes.de

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-
Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written
consent of FES.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily
those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization
for which the author works.

