

Introduction

The Fourth IISS Manama Dialogue was convened at a difficult time in regional and international politics. The states in the Gulf region have suffered three large wars over the last two decades. Now there is fantastic economic growth and dynamism, but the security picture remains very murky. The level of inter-state tension has grown with uncertainty over the political future and internal balance of Iraq, as well as concern over the regional ambitions of Iran and how the international community will handle them. Co-operation with outside actors is diplomatically sensitive, and the coherence of regional state policy is constantly tested by sometimes highly charged domestic politics.

Delegates attended the Manama Dialogue shortly after the convening of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) Heads of State summit meeting hosted by Qatar to which the President of Iran was specially invited. That very fact pointed to the absence of an adequate formal security organisation in the region that involves all the relevant actors. Again, the IISS Manama Dialogue sought to fill that void, by seeking to engage all the relevant actors in Gulf security. The attendance for the first time of the US Secretary of Defense with a powerful delegation offered the opportunity for numerous consultations with regional states and a chance to gauge the evolution of US policy towards the large geo-political challenges in the region. Unfortunately, although in 2006 the Islamic Republic of Iran had been represented by its Foreign Minister, the administration felt unable in December 2007 to send a senior delegation to Bahrain. Interestingly, Iran's absence at the Manama Dialogue was raised immediately after the summit by former President and current Expediency Council Chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who, in public remarks in Tehran, noted that Iran's voice should have been heard at the Manama summit where regional security was being discussed.

The level of attendance in 2007 was the highest ever and confirmed the Manama Dialogue's evolving role in the informal regional security architecture. Discussions at the Dialogue both in public and private reinforced the view that such an informal security institution is necessary to bring together the various stakeholders in the region's prosperity and security.



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Debates centred on three broad themes.

First among them was the uncertain process towards national reconciliation in Iraq. Appeals to regional Arab countries, especially the GCC states, to become more involved in Iraq were met with concerns that the Iraqi government was insufficiently inclusive and that the security situation still prevented whole-hearted economic investment. Emphasis was placed on the importance of holding provincial elections in Iraq within a reasonable time frame. Those elected should be able to count on better support from the central government in delivering needed local services. Given the likelihood of a drawdown in US troops in Iraq during 2008, Iraqis placed emphasis on the need to arrive at a formal US–Iraq security agreement that could provide firm underpinning to the longer-term relationship.

Second, much of the formal and informal discussion at the Manama Dialogue had to do with Iran. The summit heard a powerful statement from the US on the dilemmas posed by Iran's policies to the international community. While many concentrated on the nuclear file, there was perhaps insufficient discussion of how to handle support from Iran to illegal armed groups in Iraq who are party to sectarian and intra-Shia violence. In general, however, the responses from the region on Iran's influence in Iraq and on the nuclear issue

were revealing. They indicated that no one had yet settled on an ideal policy.

On the specific issue of the nuclear programme in Iran, there remained some concern that Iran could, at some future date, take the strategic decision to militarise its capacity. This concern persisted despite the release of US intelligence judging that Iran had halted its nuclear-weapons programme. While there was general relief that the focus of US efforts had become '100% diplomatic' there remained the sense that the region needed to think through the strategic options and at least hedge against the possibility that Iran might decide to re-start work on a nuclear device.

Doing nothing if Iran got the bomb would have the effect of ceding more regional power to the country, which has at best difficult relations with the region. At the other extreme, a military strike would not be certain to eliminate whatever programme existed, yet would inspire a backlash against states in the region and Western targets. Containment of Iran's deterrent, if one were established, would require more open cooperation on security and defence between the Gulf Arab states and the West, an approach that is difficult for some states given the thin level of popular support in the region for close cooperation with the US. Engaging with Iran must be done with full regional consultation. One prominent regional leader expressed the concern that if the West were fully to engage with Iran, some type of 'package arrangement' might be arrived at over the heads of the GCC states.

What emerged was that the international community needed to strive hard to develop a coherent attitude to the unanswered questions posed by Iran's attitude and behaviour, while being alert to genuine opportunities to engage Iran constructively in this region and globally. For the immediate future, nothing more coherent than confused hedging appears likely to describe the developing strategic relationship between the outside world and Iran.

Third, the US security relationship with the region was much discussed. There was acknowledgement of the key role the US plays, at the request of the leaders of many of the countries in the region, to provide security assurance on which dynamic economic growth can rely. Still, there was an appeal for that security relationship to rest on ever stronger

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consultative bases, where the points of view of regional countries were considered earlier in Washington's policy formulation. For those coming from Europe, this recalled the appeal made by Europeans to Washington throughout the Cold War. The challenge for those in the Gulf now, as it has been at other times for Europeans and Asians who have engaged with the US, is to develop the extrovert diplomatic practices that can succeed in penetrating complex inter-agency debates and Executive–Congressional relations in the US.

It remained the case that achieving a settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute was a vital condition both for easier strategic cooperation between the region and the US and for full-hearted internal and regional reconciliation.

Underlying these geopolitical realities and classical strategic concerns was the appreciation that the strength of movements and groups against states and central authorities has grown in the Gulf. Because of this, a well-rounded security policy could not be confined to international strategic dialogue and effective implementation of balance-of-power politics. Effective political reform would have to lead to states that were neither too strong nor too weak. The dilemma now was that for too many in the Gulf, the state can be irrelevant to their political calculations. To a degree, in fact, the state has been attacked from above and below. From above, the state has been attacked by the appeal of general transnational Muslim solidarity and at its extremes by the calls for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. From below, the state has been attacked by the revived primacy of tribal and sectarian affiliations.

The result is that the state is not the key point of reference for many citizens in some countries and state authority is not recognised as the paramount governing power. In general, these trends towards wider transnational solidarities and narrower sectarian ones exist also outside the Middle East and where they do, they weaken the power of states to control local and wider political and diplomatic agendas.

This summit helped to sharpen understandings of the way enlightened leadership in the region, by focusing on education, labour reform, political reform and diverse economic development, could bring the younger generation



up to feel, simultaneously, pride in their culture, pride in their nation and pride in their equal place in a cosmopolitan international society. Creating these positive outlooks will, in turn, give states in the region an ability to advance with greater agility their regional and international interests.

The 2007 Manama Dialogue brought out also the reality that the geopolitics of the Gulf is being globalised. If for many years the abiding international relationship was between the Gulf and the West, the development of economic and increasingly political and security interests between the East and the Gulf signals a diversification of political links. While China, Japan and India remain less vocal about their security interests in the region than are the US or European states, the trend is for these countries to take incrementally greater interest in the affairs of the region.

Future IISS Manama Dialogues will strive to ensure the participation of the national security establishments of all states that have a role to play in regional security. In this way, the Dialogues will do a great deal to establish effective habits of consultation and cooperation in the service of regional stability. ■

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