



Chapter Twelve

CONCLUSIONS

The 2005 Gulf Dialogue demonstrated that there is a strong need for the national security establishments of the participating states to take advantage of the individual and 'contact group' diplomacy that the Dialogue process inspires.

The region is a long way from establishing a formal institution that could properly build confidence, settle disputes and deter conflict. Probably no institution could be counted on, alone, to do all three. But the forum provided by the Gulf Dialogue does permit an orderly exchange of views in public and private among all those who might take part in regional security arrangements. It can help to inch the region and those with a stake in it towards a better framework for conflict resolution and diplomatic cooperation.

It is clear that this region, no less than any other, will not be able to count on purely 'architectural' solutions to regional security issues. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Asia are not the bedrocks, but

only part of the building blocks, of whatever stability exists in these regions. Balance of power, good governance, wise internal security arrangements, political and economic reform, improving rights for minorities, intense diplomatic exchanges, well-managed links with external powers, are all vital sinews in the regional security body politic, and even so, in both these areas, crises with military dimensions can emerge.

An important overarching conclusion of the 2005 Gulf Dialogue was that developments have to be made on all these fronts for the region to move organically towards an improved security dispensation, which could then take greater institutional form once regional politics permitted.

Any progress in this direction of course depends on containing the terrorist threat in each of the states in the region and developing internal political dialogues that leave less space for extremist views. It is evident that al-Qaeda has become as much a 'brand' as an organisation, and those who have promoted the brand for ill effect have been tragically able to exercise a great deal of 'soft power' among Muslims in the region who, for one reason or another, may be prone to radicalisation. Indeed, al-Qaeda members, adherents, or sympathisers, have been effective in using all the various means of modern communication

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to gain more allies to their cause. The misguided appeal of the al-Qaeda call to arms has, in the modern information age, to be countered by equally powerful messages offering more optimistic and productive futures.

This is firmly a priority of all the GCC states and Yemen. No one in the region needed to be told that this was a domestic political priority, or that failure to win hearts and minds in this battle would have dire consequences. The acknowledgement that regional governments had to take the lead in devising forceful domestic counter-terrorism policy has as its logical consequence that all will do so according to national styles. The important strategic caveat to this inevitability is that intelligence sharing between ministries of interior and active counter-terrorism cooperation must respect regional and international needs as much as domestic preferences. Moving from a rhetorical expression of shared outrage to comprehensive regional strategies for undermining the terrorist cause is still a commanding challenge.

The counter-terrorism issue is very much tied up with the different shape, pace and priority attached to internal political and economic reform in the participating states. The problem is, of course, at its most acute in an Iraq that is seeking to build a state almost from the ground up, and is having to reconcile divided and frustrated communities while developing and implementing a new constitution that attempts to maintain a sense of national purpose and integration. But it is also true that all the states of the region are struggling with a process of political and economic modernisation on which future stability and security rests. In many cases, a younger generation of leaders is grasping the globalisation challenge and seeking also to develop more pluralistic domestic politics. The relative wealth and political legitimacy of the GCC leadership gives it some comparative advantages in effectively controlling the pace of modernisation when compared to other Middle East states. But the sometimes quite dramatic difference in pace and emphasis can be a cause of internal GCC disquiet as can the different relations each enjoy with outside powers having contrasting views on the need for relatively fast-paced change.

At times, both the asymmetry of regional political and economic modernisation and the microscope under which it is analysed from the outside is problematic. At the first

Gulf Dialogue, the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia expressed reservations about the individual conclusion of free trade agreements with the US. By the second Gulf Dialogue, these concerns had dissipated and there is a more settled acknowledgment both within and outside the region of the individual nature of modernisation plans. Nevertheless, the substantial interest of the outside world and pressure for increased pace of change will be a factor affecting regional stability for some time. A continuation of very asymmetric economic and political modernisation might even in time make it harder for some of the regional states effectively to coordinate broader security perspectives.

The region's internal governance structures have become part of the security concerns of outside, especially Western, powers. These have come to view internal politics as of strategic consequence, owing to the way in which regional alliances have in the past been affected by dramatic political change – most clearly following the Iranian revolution. More recently, the domestic politics of regional states have been an overt focus of Western foreign-policy initiatives because of the perception that modernisation, properly channelled, can reduce radicalisation. Moves towards a stable security arrangement in the region will much depend on how regional and external perspectives on these questions can be harmonised. More focus on 'good governance', and less on the details of electoral arrangements, may be one element of this.

Political and economic outcomes in Iraq will no doubt be key to shaping such views. Progress in Iraq's democratisation and security would encourage the US to argue for more ambitious reform or modernisation in other states, while continued instability in Iraq could adversely condition the pace of reform especially in those states adopting a more conservative pace of change. More immediately, the continued sectarian strife in Iraq, particularly between Sunni and Shi'a, has enormous geopolitical implications in the region. Leaderships elsewhere are concerned about the impact of Shi'a political strength in Iraq on the aspirations and desires of their own Shi'a communities. The concern that local Shi'a communities might become more in thrall to prospective Iranian influence has been primarily a latent fear in recent times, but that worry is now at least partially revived. The apparently growing influence

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of Iran, not only in the south of Iraq, but to a degree in Baghdad itself, has inspired the national security establishments of the other Gulf states to express their concerns openly. Managing the geopolitics of the Shi'a–Sunni rivalry is again an element of the regional strategic agenda.

That task would be made easier if the three large powers of the Gulf had more stable relations between themselves. Those relations are now in flux as Iraq's future is decided, a clear direction for Iran's regional and international diplomacy is determined following the election of a new president and as Saudi Arabia contemplates a more extrovert foreign policy focused on counter-terrorism and the diversification of its global diplomatic and economic exchanges. The future of Gulf security depends hugely on how these three powers engage both with each other and with the outside world. While Iran aspires to a leading role in Persian Gulf security it needs not merely to find some accommodation with the US, at present a distant and unlikely prospect, but also greater trust with its smaller neighbours as well as Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The nature of the Iraqi government in 2006 will be a major factor in determining the prospects for improved Saudi–Iranian relations as well as for a balanced Iraqi–Iranian relationship.

These relations are not merely of concern to regional states and to the US. As the Gulf Dialogue clearly demonstrated, the interest of Asian powers, especially China and India, in Gulf security is substantial. In time their diplomatic engagement with the region will begin to match more closely the intensity of their economic stakes. It is a banality that the thirst for oil and gas energy of these two Asian giants is such that Gulf security is central to maintaining their high-speed economic growth. Less certain is how that dependency will shape their strategic perspectives and whether they will find themselves as often opposed as aligned to the US point of view.

That said, America's allies in Europe were famously divided over the Iraq war and since the conclusion of major hostilities have begun to find more ways to operate in the region that are compatible with US perspectives. This was most notably the case with the attempt by the so-called EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany) to fashion an agreement with Iran over its nuclear activity until that process came to a dead-end in January 2006. While the EU has long held trade talks with the GCC and NATO

launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to develop security ties with states in the region there is, nevertheless, still not a coherent European strategic approach to the area that carries weight similar to that of the US. The bilateral military agreements that Britain and France have with some of the GCC states naturally demonstrate an important security commitment. But the relatively modest expeditionary capacities of both countries means that external military support is still disproportionately a burden carried by the US.

This is problematic given the shallowness of public support amongst the populations of the Gulf for a US regional military presence. There would not necessarily be deeper support for other Western presence, but the fact remains that the overwhelming primacy of the US military engagement makes it easier for opponents to marshal an 'imperialist argument' against the US presence and to construct 'conspiracy theories' explaining its purpose. These problems are in turn compounded by the requirement of the region's leaders, in respecting the diffidence of their local populations, to sometimes play down their strategic engagement with the US.

Indeed, there is a degree of diplomatic instability in the Gulf region caused by the comparatively high profile that the US maintains and the correspondingly firm stances it takes towards regional issues compared with the generally low profile maintained by its closest regional allies and the great diplomatic discretion most of them usually display towards sensitive regional issues. This often gives the false impression that US strategic concerns are not shared with those with whom it has the closest security relationships. In fact, security perspectives, if not actual policies, can often be quite close, but this is obscured by the different diplomatic styles. For example, throughout 2005, the US, with the EU-3, were very clear in condemning what they suspected to be the development of a military option within Iran's nuclear programme. All the regional states have huge concerns on this score, but while the GCC made statements referring to the issue, the subtlety of their expression allowed Iran's leaders sometimes to portray international criticism of its activities as exclusively Western in nature.

All this points to the need for developing more formal methods for regional security diplomacy. The region will

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have to choose its own way for doing so. Models from Europe are unlikely to apply. But there is something to be said for looking towards Asia for examples of clever diplomatic structures. The tightest regional arrangements in Asia are between the relatively small states of ASEAN, which also contains one very large state, Indonesia. There is a parallel here with the GCC where Saudi Arabia collaborates with five smaller states. The member states of ASEAN came to believe, however, that it was necessary to collaborate diplomatically with all the states that had involvement with the region and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), involving the US, European powers, India and others was created in 1994 to meet this requirement. Three years later, ASEAN convened at head-of-state level the so-called ASEAN plus 3 arrangement, involving the three large East Asian powers of Korea, China and Japan, which otherwise may not have so easily been able to meet in one place.

The IISS Regional Security Summit: the Gulf Dialogue can help to play in the security field in the Gulf a role analogous to that which the ARF has played in Asia. Within the regional membership of the Gulf Dialogue, the contacts between the GCC, Iraq, Iran and Yemen have potentially a loose parallel with the ASEAN plus 3 concept. The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue provides in Asia a unique forum for defence dialogue, just as the Gulf Dialogue is the only regional forum that brings together the national security establishments of the relevant states for close consultations. In both Asia and the Gulf, smaller states have shown themselves capable of being the engines of imaginative diplomatic arrangements that can usefully involve larger powers. The true bases for regional security will have to be drawn together from the various threads analysed in this report. But to draw them together, a forum is needed. The IISS, working together with the Kingdom of Bahrain, hope that the Gulf Dialogue can play an ever-larger role in facilitating the necessary security contacts between the participating states.