

Chapter seven

Security guarantees and regional stability

Break-out group



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CHAIRMAN

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OPENING REMARKS

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Remarks made in break-out groups may not be attributed to the individuals who made them. This rule is designed to encourage free discussion.

Debate in this session took as its focus the insecurity that grips large parts of the Persian Gulf region. Factors which have heightened tensions include sectarian strife, the ongoing impact of the schism between Sunni and Shia Islam, nuclear proliferation, transnational terror networks, concern over global energy supplies, and Arab–Israeli tensions. However, participants noted that no regional or international mechanism is yet in sight that could subdue these sources of conflict.

It was asserted that the one country that might be in a position to offer security guarantees, the United States, finds itself either unable or unwilling to do so: in light of the entrenched civil war in Iraq and its own diminished stature in the region, it is unable to offer credible assurances; and it is unwilling to offer guarantees to countries such as Iran, which has so far proved reluctant to provide a quid pro quo with respect to its nuclear intentions.

Opening remarks to the break-out group provided measured yet starkly contrasting views of the issues, underscoring the absence of agreement on the origins of regional insecurity and consequently on the means required to tackle it.

Analysts from the region and interested external powers do at least agree on the critical importance of the Gulf to their national interests, as well as to the welfare of those throughout the region. They all recognise the region's impact on global security. However, major actors such as the United States, Iran and Gulf countries disagree on the threats to stability, the basic objectives of cooperation, and the ways to build a wider regional security community. Even so, they did agree that a wider regional security community was necessary to tackle insecurity.

The litany of perceived threats to Gulf security, as detailed in this session, is arresting: the danger of a failed state in Iraq; concern that Iraq's civil war could ignite a wider war in the region; gathering Iranian ambitions for nuclear power and regional hegemony; a widening fissure between the two main branches of Islam; a tussle between Arab and Persian centres of power; and questions about American influence, if not staying power, in the region. America, meanwhile, was simultaneously portrayed as part of the problem and



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yet indispensable to its solution. Few, other than some in the Iranian government, are calling for America to vacate the region. But some in regional capitals are said to be asking for the United States to scale down its visible presence and role. As one Arab participant put it, the heart of the difficulty is that the United States may be too involved in Gulf affairs: in the view of this individual, the region would be better off with American power present but more 'over the horizon' than active on the ground.

It was argued that there has been a regrettable lack of international cooperation, as the divisive debate over the 2003 Iraq intervention suggests. The bipartisan Iraq Study Group report of December 2006 determined that the situation in Iraq was grave and deteriorating. A long-term solution to Iraq's security is pivotal to regional stability, and yet that solution is not in sight. Military force cannot be expected to resurrect a state. Yet how Iraqis will fashion an evolving set

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of political and economic arrangements without substantial fresh bloodshed is equally difficult to imagine. Most analysts assert that the further disintegration of Iraq is unacceptable, but major regional and global actors seem unwilling to risk making the sacrifices that may be necessary to prevent it.

The region is also troubled by Iran's nuclear ambitions and its government's defiance of its international obligations as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran asserts its right to a full fuel-cycle programme, including uranium enrichment. But its actions have aroused suspicion that it is deceiving the International Atomic Energy Agency and outside powers in order to stall for time and eventually announce a nuclear-weapons capability. UN Security Council resolutions, while lacking teeth, have indicated a convergence among Britain, France, Germany, the United States, China and Russia that must give Iran some pause. Many in the session concluded that even further sanctions may be unable to persuade officials in Tehran's to shut down its uranium-enrichment programme. Meanwhile, Iran will no doubt watch the international diplomacy over North Korea's nuclear programme.

As one participant in the break-group stated, the question is not whether Iraq or Iran is more critical for regional security. Rather, failure to establish stability in Iraq will mean that the longer-range strategic challenge of Iran will be more troubling for the international community.

Participants remained hopeful that it is still possible to create a durable security cooperation mechanism that could secure strategic rapprochement with Iran. To make progress, governments must seize opportunities. But delegates in the break-out group asserted that the positions adopted by Iran – over its nuclear programme, Israel, alleged support to insurgents in Iraq and to Hizbullah – reduce the scope for such opportunities. It was argued that while the Baker–Hamilton report underscored the importance of engaging Iran, and while all parties profess to adhere to that objective, the fruits of any possible engagement were not yet being harvested.

With these twin security challenges looming large, the prospect of agreeing on a common approach for fostering regional cooperation becomes more difficult to imagine. The break-out group debated not only regional security architectures, but also the very aims of regional security cooperation.



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In particular, there was a vibrant discussion between those who thought it best to begin with pragmatic, incremental deals over specific issues and those who viewed striking a grand bargain or wholesale change in regional mechanisms as the best course of action.

Some analysts have noted the juxtaposition of the basic building blocks of regional security as presently envisioned – largely traditional, statecentred and dealing with preventing interstate conflict – with the diverse array of less traditional but perhaps no less threatening modern security concerns, including energy security, proliferation, maritime security and terrorism.

In considering the current state, and desired end-state of regional security arrangements, a key question concerns the boundaries of the Gulf region and the actors that should be included in a regional security system. Competing visions expressed inside the group ranged between a narrow def-

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inition of the ‘region’ of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as well as the neighbouring states of Iran, Iraq and Yemen, and a broader ‘region’ including countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and the Arab countries of the Maghreb. Regarding the role of outside powers, there was debate within the group between those who saw the United States as a distant balancer, a ‘permanent’ Middle East power and the most realistic provider of security, and those who saw the United States as a source of instability and, in the extreme view, actually inimical to regional peace. Furthermore, while some in the group intimated that there has been a relative decline in American power in the region, there appears to be growing interest and ability to engage the region from rising Asian powers such as China, Japan and India.

It was noted during the session that Europe also plays an active, varied and special role vis-à-vis Gulf security. There are many bilateral arrangements between European powers such as France and the UK and the countries of the region. The European Union (EU), meanwhile, has a well-established relationship with the GCC, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is cooperating with a number of Gulf countries. More generally, the Middle East is a critical element in much of the diplomacy of the EU and European countries. The role of the UK, France and Germany in helping to focus on seeking a negotiated settlement with Iran over its nuclear programme is perhaps the best single case of Europe playing a leading role over a high policy matter. The peacekeeping operation in Lebanon and diplomatic and economic support for an Israeli–Palestinian peace are also essential elements of European diplomacy. Finally, the five-plus-five dialogue between five southern European countries (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Malta) and five countries from Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya) deals with issues such as maritime security, counter-terrorism and crisis management, so as to bring modest but increased improvements to regional security. In short, it was stated that any discussion of Gulf regional security required consideration of Europe’s role.

Beyond debate over which countries rightly belong to a Persian Gulf regional security grouping, there were also discussions reflecting the wider public debate over the type of regional security architecture that is best suited to the area. One vision posits a cooperative security structure – perhaps akin

to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe or similar to the economically oriented Association of Southeast Asian Nations. An alternative view emphasises the need for opportunism, making incremental strides towards practical cooperation wherever possible.

The quest for a security order based on something other than an old-fashioned, state-centred balance of power held together with the threat of military force appealed to many. There is general accord that many modern security challenges – from migration flows and transnational terrorism to energy security – are not amenable to the same kind of rigid, bureaucratic, state-centric mechanisms designed to prevent interstate war. Yet it is clear that agreeing on practical steps forward remains problematic, and that talking about regional cooperation appears easier than actually achieving it. The objective of constructing regional security cooperation to cope with modern threats continues to gain purchase in international forums, but while Gulf security may be seen as a beneficial common objective, an agreed path towards it has not yet been mapped.

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Indeed, for all the interest in the group in tackling non-state actors, and moving beyond a narrow appreciation of national interests to better address transnational threats, there remained a pervasive sense that global security would be better served by returning to the basics of modern international relations – respect for sovereign, independent states and support for the integrity of the state. However, group participants also heard that it was the perception of threats emanating from the region that prompted foreign intervention in Iraq, and animates discussion of how members of the region and the international community should act towards Iran: thus the region presents a security paradox.

It was also clear that issues surrounding the use of force and the general utility of military force remain hotly debated. The region is beholden to past arrangements, underpinned by conventional military power and nuclear deterrence – the sources of power used to deter traditional cross-border attacks. Regional security approaches remain largely bureaucratic, focused on grand scenarios with naval combatants and heavy armour fighting similar forces. Until more cooperative forms of assurance can be erected, these traditional military power elements will remain salient in the Gulf.

