

## **Security Arrangements and Extra-Regional Intrusions in the Persian Gulf\***

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**Abstract:** The Persian Gulf region has always been of particular interest both to the regional and foreign powers. Foreign interest in the Persian Gulf area has always been of economic, security and political nature. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Washington has systematically tried to securitize the inter-state relations in the region. In May 2006, the American administration launched a new (Persian) Gulf Security Dialogue (GS) that serves as the principal coordination mechanism between the U.S. and these littoral states. This approach combined with the NATO plan to further its regional partnership, made any significant rapprochement among the Persian Gulf states on the issue of security almost impossible. The region presents an increased strategic importance for NATO's ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. NATO's presence was to promote an arrangement similar to that of Partnership for Peace (PFP) if a friendly country felt threatened in its security. Notwithstanding its negative assessment of Iran's role in the region, NATO views this country as a key state in the Persian Gulf.

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\* Views expressed in this paper are of the author, without any indication or implication for the current policy positions of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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## Introduction

Because of its great strategic value, the Persian Gulf waterway has always been of particular interest both to the regional and foreign powers. In the past, when control of the maritime routes guaranteed the supremacy of European states, dominating the Persian Gulf ports was the subject of covetousness for these powers, particularly the British Empire. The discovery of oil, combined with the Cold War exigencies, captured the attention of new emerging powers towards this region.

Foreign interest in the Persian Gulf region has always had three components: economy, security and politics. It is not overstated to stress the centrality of energy resources in the economic sector as a predominant factor. In this context, securing access to energy and the flow of oil became vital for world economic prosperity. Thus, a logical question arises: how is it possible to create a favorable environment that will enable oil producing states to send their oil to the world market while still allowing consumer countries to meet their energy needs in safety?

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, added more impetus to the security issues in the Persian Gulf. President Bush's doctrine of "preemptive war" and "the global war on terror" placed the Persian Gulf region at the heart of his post-9/11 strategic vision. The Bush administration used the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington as a great opportunity to revamp the regional security by undertaking some drastic measures.

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the idea of regime change in Iran as well as other American Neocons' grandiose plans about the necessity to reshape the "Greater Middle East", made governments in the region nervous. In addition, by giving prominence to the "security question" over all other considerations, the US policy plunged the region deeper into uncertainty. Washington has systematically tried, and to a large extent succeeded, to securitize the inter-state relations in the region. This approach combined with the NATO plan to further its regional partnership, made any significant rapprochement among

the Persian Gulf states on the issue of security almost impossible. For these reasons, a collective regionally crafted security arrangement that includes littoral states of Iran, Iraq and the countries of (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council would be unattainable in a foreseeable future.

### **Background of U.S. Interest**

The United States post-Cold War era dominance transformed Washington's concerns, into world concerns. *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (The White House, 1999) (December 1999) identifies a range of threats to U.S. security. President Clinton announced that "the goal of the national security strategy is to ensure the protection of our nation's fundamental and enduring needs: protect the lives and safety of Americans, maintain the sovereignty of the United States, with its values, institutions and territory intact, and provide for the prosperity of the nation and its people. He also firmly stated that the strategy will achieve three core objectives of "enhancing our security, bolstering our economic prosperity, and promoting democracy."<sup>1</sup>

For President Clinton, protecting the U.S. would be realized only through the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad. The President's assessment diverged from the appraisal of his Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, as stated in his *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (1999): "America's security relies upon a military that can shape and respond to world events, while at the same time preparing for the uncertain challenges of the future."<sup>2</sup>

Succeeding the Clinton administration's policies and forced to manage the traumatized America after 9/11, President George W. Bush sought an integrated regional approach to bolster US security objectives. He was comforted by the sympathy of NATO and growing military/security partnership with the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council States. A set of measures adopted in the aftermath of 9/11 by Bush's White House, where Vice-President Dick Cheney and his neoconservative entourage were engineering a brand new - refurbished security architecture, helped to project American power and influence into areas viewed as vital to US interests. The grave

nature of terrorist attacks, combined with instantaneously available shocking footage, gave a new impetus to US outreach actions. They enjoyed a greater legitimacy accorded to the victims of a universally decried attack.

In Bush's integrated regional approach, the Middle East occupied a particular attention. He recognized the need to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and favored the two-state solution as part of a new security equation to protect America. It was ironic for Bush junior to implicitly recognize the essence of Saddam Hussein's message on the interconnectivity of security issues in the Middle East; the message that Bush senior didn't want to know about in the heat of the Kuwaiti crisis in 1990-1991.

On a Crusade-type mission in the aftermath of 9/11, in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, George W. Bush pictures his worldview with a triumphant tone: "The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. In the twenty-first century, only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom will be able to unleash the potential of their people and assure their future prosperity."<sup>3</sup> The course of events following the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2002 and the US-led coalition forces' assault on Iraq in March 2003 depicts a very different picture of this ideal world. It seems that the White House under Bush is out of control with respect to honoring human rights. Retired Major General Tony Taguba, who was enlisted by the Army to conduct an initial investigation into the abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, has recently denounced the Bush administration for its abuse of Iraqi prisoners' rights: "The Commander-in-Chief [President Bush] and those under him authorized a systematic regime of torture," Taguba wrote. "After years of disclosures by government investigations, media accounts, and reports from human rights organizations, there is no longer any doubt as to whether the current administration has committed war crimes. The only question is whether those who

ordered the use of torture will be held to account.” (Benjamin, 2008 {internet})

Behind the façade of conducting a ‘just war’ on terror, the Bush administration continued to court the Arab rulers of the Persian Gulf to assume a bigger share of the war costs and participate more actively in shaping the entire region of the Middle East. Americans have been satisfied by PGCC States defense spending, even before the war on terror. This burden-sharing has already been observed by the council members during Clinton presidency. In 1997, the U.S. government urged its allies to increase their efforts in defense spending. *A Report to the United States Congress by the Secretary of Defense* (2000) indicates that all six PGCC States met the Congressional defense spending objectives, since the shares of GDP they spent on defense during 1999 were all greater than United States’ 3.2-percent. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar all had shares in the 10 to 14 percent range. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates’ 1999 defense spending share was over 18 percent higher than its 1998 share. The UAE was also one of two PGCC states that achieved the Congressional multinational military activities target – the other was Qatar – by increasing their levels of funding for UN peace operations during 1999. Two other council members also achieved the Congressional foreign assistance target in 1998: Saudi Arabia by making an increase of almost 23 percent in its foreign assistance funding, and Kuwait by spending just over one percent of its GDP on foreign assistance. (Cohen, 2000)

The U.S. government values the southern littoral states of the Persian Gulf as its principal security partners in this region. They continued to spend above-average shares of GDP on defense despite reductions in oil prices in 1998. Relative to its share of total GDP, Bahrain contributed the largest share of ground combat capability; the second largest share of combat aircraft; and the third largest share of naval tonnage. The Report emphasizes that no other state in the Report matches this performance in all three armed services. Kuwait’s foreign assistance contributions proportion to its GDP is second only to Denmark’s, and it is the only other state that meets the highly ambitious Congressional foreign assistance target of contributing one

percent of its GDP. Kuwait provides significant grant aid and humanitarian assistance to lesser-developed countries, primarily in the Arab world, but also includes nations in Southeast Asia, Africa and the Balkans, the Report states. Immediately after praising them for their military effort, the Report invokes the existence of a substantial disparity between the military forces of the PGCC states and those of their principal antagonists in the Persian Gulf. (Cohen, 2000) Iran is the apparent target of this evaluation because the only other non-PGCC state in the region is Iraq, considered to be a client-state to the U.S. As a remedy to bridge this gap in the PGCC collective ability to defend the region, Washington favors the following measures: to extend its military umbrella over the friendly countries in the Persian Gulf through a massive military presence and build-up mainly in Qatar and Bahrain; a close military cooperation between this council members and other pro-American Arab states (Egypt and Jordan as being the only viable players in the region); and a massive sale of military hardware to enhance the capability.

Washington extensively enjoys the largesse of all PGCC client states as the following passage of the above-mentioned *Report* shows. Washington pays tribute to its PGCC partners for their contribution to regional security by providing U.S. forces the use of military facilities, transit rights, and other forms of access. Bahrain, for example, has provided port facilities to U.S. naval forces for 50 years; it also hosts the headquarters for U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, furnishes facilities for pre-positioned equipment, and has granted rapid access for U.S. military aircraft when needed. Oman likewise allows the United States to preposition equipment on its territory, and has granted access to its military bases since 1980. Since the (Persian) Gulf War (1991), defense cooperation agreements permitting access and pre-positioning have been signed with Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Under the agreement with Kuwait, that nation has agreed to offset U.S. pre-positioning and exercise costs. At the end of 1999, Kuwait housed the bulk of U.S. ground troops in the region and much of our air power. Saudi Arabia also provides access to U.S. forces, contributes substantially to offset the costs of U.S. military operations enforcing UN sanctions on Iraq, and funded the

construction of a \$120 million friendly forces housing complex. In addition, since November 1995, both Bahrain and Qatar have hosted several Air Expeditionary Force deployments in support of Operation Southern Watch. Furthermore, the United Arab Emirates contributed forces to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo - its first ever out-of-area deployment. (Cohen, 2000)

Four devastating wars have created the opportunity for the U.S. to regain and reinforce the position they had in the Middle East before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. American rehabilitation started with the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). The Kuwaiti crisis (1990-1991) consolidated the U.S. partial domination over the region. The events of 9/11 contributed to the denunciation of Islam and pretending it as a violent religion and depicted Muslims as terrorists and anti-Westerners. As a result, the war on the Taliban and the subsequent occupation of Afghanistan extended the long military arm of the U.S., portrayed as apparent savior of Muslims from the tyranny of their own Islamist rulers. With the invasion of Iraq (2003), the U.S. became a Middle Eastern country in the same way they became European after the World War II. As their presence in Afghanistan and Iraq continues, America behaves like other states in the region by interfering in regional security affairs.

In his Introduction to the 2003 *Report*, Donald Rumsfeld builds on the Afghan and Iraq wars. He established the leading military missions given to U.S. military forces under a transformed defense strategy as: defending the United States; assuring friends and allies; deterring aggression and coercion forward in critical regions; swiftly defeat aggression in two overlapping major conflicts while preserving for the President the option to pursue a decisive victory in one of those conflicts, including the possibility of regime change or occupation; and conducting a limited number of smaller-scale contingency operations. (Rumsfeld, 2003)

He couldn't be more explicit in stating how redesigning and transforming U.S. forces are a crucial instrument of American foreign policy.

In May 2006, the American administration launched a new (Persian) Gulf Security Dialogue (GS) that serves as the principal

coordination mechanism between the U.S. and these littoral states. The core objectives of the Dialogue are the promotion of intra-PGCC and PGCC-U.S. cooperation to meet common perceived threats. The Dialogue provides a framework for U.S. engagement with the PGCC countries in the following six areas: (1) the improvement of PGCC defense capabilities and interoperability; (2) regional security issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Lebanon; (3) counter-proliferation; (4) counter-terrorism and internal security; (5) critical infrastructure protection; and (6) commitments to Iraq. (Blanchard & Grimmett, 2008:1)

There is no doubt about the real nature of this one-sided Dialogue as past practice of U.S.-PGCC relations show, as the creation of PGCC was a reaction to the Iranian revolutionaries perceived threat in war with Iraq. Some of council conservative members were actively supporting Iraq in its war efforts against Iran. It's worth mentioning the depth of dependency with regards to Arab states and the U.S. military for their security, in spite of the existing regional organizations such as the League of Arab States and the PGCC. From 1981, the year of the council's foundation through September 30, 2006, the United States delivered over \$72 billion in weapons, training, equipment, and related services to the six member states of the council through the government-to-government Foreign Military Sales program. Over \$57 billion of these sales were made to Saudi Arabia. (Defense Security, 2006)

It seems that Washington justifies the Arab purchase of U.S. armaments, especially after the regime change in Iraq, as a measure to counter Iran. In late July 2007, the United States announced new military pacts worth 20 billion dollars for Saudi Arabia, 13 billion dollars for Egypt and 30 billion dollars for Israel in a bid to counter Iran. Details of the new Middle East military sale/aid came as Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, left Washington for a joint trip to the region, seeking assurances of help in stabilizing Iraq and forging new assistance agreements with the (Persian) Gulf States, Israel, and Egypt; Rice said in a statement. Beside the usual political rhetoric about the reasons for her government's actions, Secretary Rice alleges that the arms sales is

necessary to bolster forces of moderation and support a broader strategy to counter the negative influences of Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran. "The arms package for Saudi Arabia covers missile defenses, early warning systems, air power and naval systems to counter Iran", said a senior US defense official briefing reporters traveling with Gates. (AFP, 2007)

Arms sales are a powerful component of the U.S. and other Western powers' strategy to maintain their hegemony. "Western defense firms regard the [Persian] Gulf kingdoms as an especially lucrative market today, given that record oil prices have them swimming in surplus revenue. The six PGCC states spent \$233 billion on arms imports from 2000 to 2005, accounting for 70 percent of total armament expenditures in the Arab world." (Gearon, 2007)

The U.S. government has always attached conditions for the use of arms purchased by Arab countries. This package follows the same rationale. "In October 2007, 188 Members [of Congress] signed a letter to President Bush stating that unless the Administration provides assurances that the sale of JDAM [Joint Direct Attack Munition] kits to Saudi Arabia will not 'harm U.S. forces in the region or undercut Israel's qualitative military advantage,' they are prepared to oppose any proposed JDAM sale. The letter also called for regular reporting, tight Congressional oversight, and intense consultations' with Israel. Representatives of the American-Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC) have stated that AIPAC 'supports the Kirk-Carney letter and efforts by Congress to seek assurances from the administration that ironclad measures will be included in the final arms package to ensure the safety of American troops and [U.S.] allies in the region.' In November 2007, 117 Members signed a letter to President Bush requesting that formal notification regarding any proposals to sell 'high technology armaments to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' be postponed until January 15, 2008." (Blanchard & Grimmett, 2008:1)<sup>4</sup> The joint AIPAC-Congressional pressure on the White House appeared to be an extra assurance since in July 2007; Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert confirmed that Israel had received a detailed and explicit commitment from the United States to ensure Israel's qualitative military edge over the Arab states. This has been

reiterated by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak during an October 2007 visit to Washington, where he stated that Israel has understandings and arrangements with the U.S. Administration that make Tel Aviv confident that Israel's military qualitative edge will be kept. (Blanchard & Grimmett, 2008:1)

After Olmert and Barak clear confirmation, the question would be who is the Saudi (or PGCC) enemy that necessitates the purchasing of so many advanced arms and for so long in the absence of war with Israel and end of Saddam Hussein?

### **NATO in the Persian Gulf<sup>5</sup>**

In the volatile and unsettled context of security in the Persian Gulf and in absence of an effective regionally generated cooperation, dominant foreign powers have always attempted to position themselves as guarantor of stability in the region. One of the consequences of this presence is widening the security gap among the eight Persian Gulf states.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a newcomer in the Persian Gulf. For the Alliance, the region encompasses a vital strategic importance for three reasons: 1. its geographic location; 2. its continuing instability and; 3. its energy resources -approximately 60% of the world's oil reserves are located in the region. Moreover, the Persian Gulf countries hold the world's second (Iran), third (Qatar), fourth (Saudi Arabia) and fifth (UAE) natural gas reserves after Russia. The current increase in oil prices is a reminder of how the global economy is heavily dependent on the Persian Gulf's energy resources and will remain so for decades to come.

By the same account, NATO assumes that region's volatile security has recently been aggravated because of the new global security threats posed by internationally active terrorist groups and the (alleged) proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Most countries in the region are facing the danger of potential extremist and terrorist activity on their territory, with perhaps profound implications for the stability of the Middle East as a whole.

The Persian Gulf also presents an increased strategic importance for NATO's ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The future of Iraq is a crucial determinant for the whole region. All NATO member states are highly aware of the dangers of instability in Iraq and of the importance of assisting the new Iraqi authorities to take control of the security situation themselves. Moreover, Iran, by far the most populous country, is emerging as a more powerful state in the region. NATO assumes that a nuclear capable Iran, with ballistic missiles capacity, would be a truly frightening prospect. Therefore, developments in the Persian Gulf and the Greater Middle East are likely to have an increasingly important impact on Euro-Atlantic security.

Because of its strategic importance, there has been considerable Western, primarily US, military presence in the Persian Gulf for decades. After 9/11, the perception of the region's pivotal international security role has further increased. The PGCC states who have basing agreements with the United States, the most powerful NATO member, serve as important bridgeheads for the hyper-power. Furthermore, in the context of the war against terrorism, forces from NATO member countries have been operating in the region. For example, a US Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) team has conducted a series of exercises in the Arabian Sea in the context of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Until late 2003, Germany had an NBC battalion in Kuwait, which was stationed there before the Iraq war to provide protection from a potential Iraqi biological and chemical weapons attack. The German battalion was part of a multinational NBC contingent based in Doha, Qatar, which also comprises Czech forces, among others.

Despite American push for more military cooperation between the PGCC States, cyclic crisis in the region revealed the Peninsula Shields'<sup>6</sup> incapability to provide any worthy security for its state-members. Based on an inter-Arab initiative called "Damascus Declaration" (March 1991), Syria and Egypt were expected to provide forces to the Peninsula Shield. Lack of trust, artificiality of rapprochement in inter-Arab political dynamic, the rational practice of "chacun pour soi"<sup>7</sup>, absence of accountability and political openness,

as well as some structural problems regarding the exercise of authority, prevented closer military cooperation between the Persian Gulf States and their big brothers in Egypt and Syria.

Under the pretext of "growing air and naval threats from Iran and from terrorist infiltration by sea", the United States is reportedly planning to focus on improving the council state naval and air cooperation. In mid-2006, the Bush Administration began efforts to revive and build on the Clinton Administration's 'Cooperative Defense Initiative' to integrate the PGCC defenses with each other and with the United States. Under that initiative, in early 2001, the Southern Persian Gulf littoral states inaugurated its 'Belt of Cooperation' network for joint tracking of aircraft and coordination of air defense systems, built by Raytheon. Another part of that initiative, to which Bush Administration officials are attaching new importance, is U.S.-PGCC joint training to defend against a chemical or biological attack, as well as more general joint military training and exercises. The Cooperative Defense Initiative was a scaled-back version of an earlier U.S. idea to develop and deploy a PGCC-wide theater missile defense (TMD) system. However, this missile defense concept is reportedly a focus of the renewed Bush Administration initiative, in response to Iran's growing missile capabilities. The original idea envisioned a system under which separate parts (detection systems, intercept missiles, and other equipment) of an integrated TMD network would be based in the six different PGCC states. That concept ran up against PGCC states' financial constraints and differing perceptions among the [Persian] Gulf States of the threat environment. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have Patriot antimissile units of their own, and these states, in addition to Qatar, host U.S.-controlled Patriot systems." (Katzman, 2006:18)

As debate surrounding Iran's nuclear program heats up, the question of non-proliferation, even de-proliferation, became prominent in the U.S. security approach to the Persian Gulf. For instance, the 2006 Bush Administration joint U.S.-PGCC security initiative focused on counter-proliferation actions as Washington encouraged the PGCC States to close Iranian companies which might be used to procure WMD technology. Another aspect of the initiative

is to track shipments to Iran. The Bahrain-based 5th Fleet/Navcent command plays a major role in patrolling the Persian Gulf to prevent smuggling. (Katzman, 2006:19)

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 removed any threat to Washington's PGCC client-states emanating from Bagdad. Other (alleged) viable menaces to American and its NATO allies interest in the Persian Gulf come from "Iran's nuclear program and extremist Islamists", as stated by the Alliance Secretary General in a visit to the PGCC States in late January 2008. (MirEmadi, 2008)

Following the regime change in Baghdad, 16 NATO Allies have troops deployed in Iraq. Moreover, all 26 NATO countries have contributed to NATO's training mission there, either inside or outside of Iraq. For example, German forces were training Iraqi police and soldiers in the UAE.

#### **NATO New Frontier: 'Istanbul Cooperation Initiative'**

Ten years of "Mediterranean Dialogue" did not produce any meaningful breakthrough in NATO relations with its Mediterranean neighbors to the south and eastern region of the Sea.

A new attempt was made at the Treaty summit in Istanbul in 2004 to involve NATO in the Middle East region through the framework of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). The initiative's primary goal was to improve security and regional stability through actively promoting NATO's co-operation with friendly countries in the field of security. In that sense, the Alliance established a framework for collaboration with those countries in the areas of tackling internationally active terrorist groups, helping prevent WMD proliferation and illegal arms trafficking, as well as contributing to NATO-led peace operations. NATO deepened its involvement by providing advice on defense reform, defense budgeting, defense planning and civil-military relations to friendly States in the Persian Gulf. By 2005, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE have formally joined the ICI.

NATO's presence in the region was not limited to assisting defense reform, strengthening security dialogue and confidence

building. It was invited to promote an arrangement similar to that of Partnership for Peace (PFP) if a friendly country felt threatened in its security. In order to improve the negative image of NATO in the region, the Secretary General of the Alliance recalled the necessity of conducting a more aggressive public diplomacy in the Arab world by showing how it can contribute to Middle East security.

NATO's decision to go out of its historical area was made to reach out to a very sensitive region from where the culprits of 9/11 emanated; in other words, to go to the source of security concerns for the members of the Organization. What is astonishing, however, and reveals the real intention of the Alliance, remains the contradiction between NATO's deeds and its discourse: isolating Iran that denounced the attacks of 9/11 while rewarding PGCC members, home to the authors of 9/11 events !

NATO is concerned about issues such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, smuggling, drug trafficking and illegal immigration. In a speech to the conference on "NATO's evolving role in the Middle East", organized by Carnegie Endowment, Washington D.C., 3 June 2005, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer raised three major developments that underline the need for the transatlantic community to focus on the Middle East. The first question raised is the powerful interdependence between Middle Eastern and transatlantic security by insisting on what he described as new threats – terrorism, proliferation, organized crime, failed states – that affect the two communities and require a common response.

For the Secretary General who sees "a new, positive dynamic in many parts of the Middle East", but notices question marks hanging over countries such as Syria and Iran, NATO must be pro-active in dealing with challenges to their shared security and common values, wherever they may emerge. In this new dynamic, the invitation to Persian Gulf states to work with NATO under the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative is viewed as a way to address new threats. The way to reach their goal, NATO proposes an institutional approach. (NATO Online library, 2007)

NATO's talks with members of the PGCC were successful as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Emirates signed the NATO's

Istanbul Summit Communiqué in 2004. At the symposium “NATO and the PGCC: Cooperation Within the Framework of the Istanbul Summit”, held in Riyadh in January 2007, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal said “The Kingdom will study the proposal submitted by NATO to join the Istanbul Summit”. NATO’s Deputy Secretary-General Alessandro Minuto Rizo was among the conference participants. The Communiqué proposes cooperation in the areas of exchanging information, experience and technical cooperation to combat terror in addition to border security. (Qusti, 2007)

At the same time, NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (1995) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI, 2004) have already brought the Alliance from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf region. The NATO presence in the Persian Gulf took a solid footing when Saudi Arabia became an ICI partner in January. The alliance is now set to consider a formal link-up with the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Unlike the NATO’s partners in (Persian) Gulf and the Middle East region, which are all authoritarian regimes, the alliance prides itself as sharing ‘common values’ with its partners in the Asia-Pacific. Here, NATO’s refrain is ‘common values and common security threats’. (Bhadrakumar, 2007)

### **NATO and Iran**

Notwithstanding its negative assessment of Iran’s role in the region, NATO views this country as a key state in the Persian Gulf. NATO assumes “Iran’s historic ambitions in the region and this country’s eagerness to promote Islamic revolution abroad in the 1980s” as a source of suspicion by many regional neighbors of Tehran. For these countries, Iran under the Shah had been the main guarantor of political status quo in the region, while, during the 1980s and early 1990s, under the Republic, Iran has become the primary promoter of Islamic revivalism in the region. According to NATO perceptions: “Iran’s neighbors have also critically view as terrorist groups some resistance and revolutionary movements that Tehran

supports". The Islamic Republic's links with groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and others have also been a key issue in relations with the West. Other contentious topics between Iran and the Allies include the Middle East peace process, human rights in the country and, first and foremost, its' nuclear program. The revolutionary political system that replaced the Shah in 1979 has long been distrustful and hostile to the West and to the US in particular. However, Iran has developed a more conciliatory foreign policy approach since reformers came to power in the late 1990s. But hopes for a normalization of diplomatic relations have not been fulfilled. Iran's ambiguous policy towards Afghanistan and Iraq reflects fundamental divisions between Iranian ideologues, those who want to export the Islamic revolution and pragmatists who see stability as a greater priority for Iran.<sup>8</sup>

NATO is aware of the fact that Tehran cannot tolerate any threat to its security that may come from Iraq, but deplores at the same time Iran's alleged "meddling in its neighbor's internal affairs". The Organization claims that Iran's policy on Iraq is confused, unsettled and contradictory, wavering between support for stabilization and efforts aimed to increase its influence whilst backing Moqtada al-Sadr's destabilizing force..

A combination of self-generated fear of Iran in the Arab world, American efforts to isolate Iran in the region and Tehran's inability to communicate clearly its intentions, resulted in rendering Iran's nuclear program as the most dominating issue on the Persian Gulf and international security. While Tehran insists on the peaceful nature of its program, certain countries are suspicious about this claim. They have tried, and to some extent could successfully convince the UN Security Council and have invoked, to some of Iran's neighbors, that this program could not be justified under a civilian nuclear energy program.

Based on rumors and US accusations about the real nature of Tehran's nuclear intentions, NATO alleges the greatest fear is that a nuclear-armed Iran would incite a nuclear arms race in the region and could lead to further WMD proliferation. Now that the context of an imminent threat is so carefully and successfully crafted, then the

rational conclusion would be a way to stop Iran's nuclear program for the sake of non-proliferation.

The continuation of the events indicates that the Iranian case became a pretext for certain powers to extend their influence and to conclude lucrative military- economic contracts with some states in the Persian Gulf area. During his visit to Abu Dhabi, in January 2008, the latest stop on his tour of the Persian Gulf, French President Nicolas Sarkozy concluded a deal with his counterpart, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, on nuclear co-operation that could be worth up to \$6 billion. France already has long-standing military co-operation accords with countries in the region, including the UAE and Qatar. The accord for co-operation in civilian nuclear activities, a first step toward building a nuclear reactor, would be the third of such deals France has signed with Arab countries recently, after Libya, branded 'rogue state' until recently by Western powers, and Algeria. On the same trip, Sarkozy also offered Saudi Arabia nuclear assistance during his visit to the kingdom. France generates a large majority of its power from nuclear reactors and is keen to export its technology and expertise in developing civilian energy. In an interview with Al Jazeera while in Qatar, in January 2008, Sarkozy affirmed Arab nations' right to nuclear energy. However, he said the right did not extend to Iran, as he believed the Islamic Republic should prove definitively that it had no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons before it should be allowed to develop civilian nuclear energy. "It would be giving credit to the current Iranian regime if civilian nuclear energy is only used by western democracies," he said. "France tells Iran 'give up your race for a nuclear weapon - it's a risk and you don't really need it'. And, if you [Iran] stop the race for a nuclear weapon, you would have access to civilian nuclear power." Sarkozy's comments came as officials revealed that Areva, the French nuclear reactor manufacturer, had signed a \$700 million electricity distribution and transmission deal with Qatar.

France's interest in the Persian Gulf is not limited to economic gains in a volatile environment. Their ambition is also of strategic nature. Sarkozy's nuclear deal was accompanied by a military accord when the UAE government asked for a French military presence on its

territory by creating their first permanent military base in the Persian Gulf. The accord could provide political and psychological comfort to Emirates by adding another layer to the security that the U.S. is already supplying them. Contrary to the assessment made by regional observers, this accord complements the U.S. and NATO's previously described plans for the region, not a challenge to them. A long-term French strategic position in the Persian Gulf does not confront American exclusivity, since there is no way that France could undermine the fundamental architecture of the hegemonic American position in the (Persian) Gulf. Multiplication of foreign players, whose interest fundamentally differs from that of indigenous people in the Persian Gulf, only complicate any regional attempt to achieve a security system based on regional needs. It is absolutely certain that the multiplication of the Western military presence in the Persian Gulf intends to secure those objectives laid down by NATO, i.e., energy security, combating 'Political Islamism', and the alleged challenge of Iran nuclear program and securing Arab arms market for great powers. Indeed, it is to keep Iran out and the Western powers in. In this context, Russia, China and India will be peripheral powers with limited interests in the region.

NATO is right to observe that Tehran "obviously wants some kind of security guarantee, which only the US can offer." The Organization is aware of Iran's security concerns<sup>9</sup> but claims that this country has been a divisive issue between the US and its Allies and caused serious transatlantic friction since the 1980s. Those frictions have been patched-up since then and there now exists a coordinated strategy among the Allies. Three United Nations Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran are a clear manifestation of this common strategy.

NATO believes that any viable solution to Iran's nuclear issue requires close transatlantic co-operation. For this reason it suggested that the North Atlantic Council (NAC) put Iran on its agenda proposing an approach to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear program and to engage the country in a regional security dialogue.

### **The way ahead**

The (Persian) Gulf Co-operation Council (PGCC) was created in response to the Iraq-Iran war as a regional security arrangement. Even if the establishment of a sub-regional security structure for protecting the member states against a foreign threat was the main objective of the Council, the PGCC has failed to institute an integrated defense policy. One of the reasons for this failure is the imposing weight of Saudi Arabia inside the organization. Division among the members on the relationship with Iran and the US invasion of Iraq also reveal serious problems that hamper the regional integration. Contrary to comments made by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal<sup>10</sup> at the (Persian) Gulf Dialogue meeting in Bahrain in December 2004, the PGCC doesn't believe that the region requires guarantees provided by the collective will of the international community. All indications point to the US as the sole guarantor of PGCC security and all other powers provide an accessory assistance to Washington.

NATO's desire to develop a relationship with the PGCC should be observed in this optic. Some of the PGCC countries have contributed to Euro-Atlantic security as a means to reach the US. For example, the UAE have committed troops to NATO-led operations in the Balkans. Further development and deepening of NATO's relationship with the Persian Gulf States reinforce the PGCC's dependency on non-indigenous powers, chief among them the U.S.

Western States try to isolate Iran in the Persian Gulf and create at the regional level a "Coalition of Moderates", with the participation of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, the United States, Britain, and other NATO members, against the so-called "Coalition of Radicals/Extremists", Iran, Syria and their Middle Eastern dependants. If successful, NATO will become a global military organization that fabricates a new justification for its contested existence since the demise of the Soviet threat. The PGCC-NATO military and security co-operation is constructed to contain their self-styled "common challenge", i.e., Iran.

Iran will be better off by trying to replicate the kind of security model Russians have established in the Caspian Sea through bilateral security understanding, not agreements, with its less hostile Persian Gulf Arab neighbors.

Long-term challenge to Iran's security and territorial integrity could emanate from Arab neighbors, not the United States.

The current economic boom in the UAE in general and Dubai's development in particular reinforce Emirates' autonomy in face of their traditional dependency to the Iranian market for re-exporting their goods. The UAE is now less vulnerable to an eventual Tehran pressure than before. It seems that Iran should resign to and live with the permanency of her Arab neighbors' hostility that is caused by their inability to manage bilateral and multilateral relations with Tehran. For its part, Iran has not been quite successful in convincing Arabs of its peaceful and non-belligerent intentions through concrete actions.

The current deadlock bolsters the U.S. strategic position in the region as an indispensable protector of weak Arab regimes. Therefore It is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage an Iran-Arab security arrangement in the Persian Gulf in total absence of U.S. involvement as a regional major player. All past attempts by Iran to produce a tangible regional security environment have failed. Future efforts will also fail unless: 1. The U.S. is at the table and accede to creating such an indigenous regional collective security forum; 2. Iran's Middle East policy focuses on the Arab states instead of Arab militant groups. A more 'main-stream' approach has a better chance to succeed.

Anti-Shiite and anti-Persian sentiment exists throughout the Persian Gulf and in many other Arab states. The United Arab Emirates' territorial claims generate considerable Arab sympathy in the region. Arab leaders are unwilling to accept Iranian nuclear program. Recent proposal by President Ahmadinejad of Iran about the creation of a new Persian Gulf security pact and a 12-point cooperation plan, including on free trade and joint investments in oil and gas including Iran was assumed by some in the region and by the Westerns powers as an initiative for consolidating Iranian hegemony, not a genuine collective security arrangement. (Lynch, 2008)

The Qatari presidency of the summit welcomed President Ahmedinejad's proposals in a brief statement. "They will be examined by the PGCC in a way to reinforce the relations of good neighborhood and mutual respect ... and to contribute to strengthening security and stability in the region," it said. However, Ahmadinejad's address received a cool reception from some PGCC delegations, who mostly described it as "utopian" and "unrealistic", while noting they had received no fresh assurances on the nuclear issue.

The final declaration of the summit reiterated the PGCC position of demanding a peaceful solution" to Iran's nuclear crisis, while it exhorted Tehran to "pursue dialogue with the international community". The PGCC has already announced plans to launch its own nuclear program, for civilian purposes only. A proposal by the group for an internationally controlled consortium to provide Middle East countries with enriched uranium was received without enthusiasm by Iran. (AFP, 2007)

It seems that the PGCC states content themselves with the idea of containing Iran by foreign countries who force a regime of the balance of power.

For the time being, the deadlock is almost complete!

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stormingmedia.us/91/9161/A916144.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.fas.org/man/docs/adr\\_00/index.html](http://www.fas.org/man/docs/adr_00/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> (Under the seal of) The President of the United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, Washington, September 2002. See <http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/nss2002.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *The Report* presents a detail account of arms systems purchased by PGCC States.

<sup>5</sup> For an official view of the NATO interest in the Persian Gulf security see: <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORT CUT=676>. This section of our article contains large excerpts of the document.

<sup>6</sup> A small multinational force of about 10,000 personnel, established in 1981, but very ineffective in shielding its members during the Iraqi invasion of 1990. Neither the Omani proposal to increase the force number to 100,000, nor the PGCC States' agreement on a 22,000-strong force could be reached by a weak and loosely maintained group of rich countries.

<sup>7</sup> "anybody for his own"

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORT CUT=676>

<sup>9</sup> Those concerns are mainly related to the American hostility towards Tehran and the PGCC territorial claims over Iran's three islands (Tunbs and Abu Mousa) in the Persian Gulf.

<sup>10</sup> He said that guarantees for (Persian) Gulf security cannot be provided unilaterally even by the only superpower in the world.