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Toward an Inclusive Security Arrangement in the Persian Gulf

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Executive Summary

- **Abandon dominance.** For many of the United States' security partners, even a dysfunctional Pax Americana is preferable to the compromises that a security architecture would inevitably entail. The preconditions for creating a successful security architecture can emerge only if the United States begins a military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and credibly signals it no longer seeks to sustain hegemony.
- **Encourage regional dialogue, but let the region lead.** The incoming Biden administration's hint that it will seek an inclusive security dialogue in the Persian Gulf is a welcome first step toward shifting the burden of security to the regional states themselves. For such an effort to be successful, the United States should play a supporting role while urging regional states to take the lead.
- **Include other major powers.** The regional dialogue should include the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and major Asian powers with a strong interest in stability in the Persian Gulf. Including them can help dilute Washington's and Beijing's roles while protecting the region from inter-Asian rivalries in the future.

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Introduction

By all metrics, Pax Americana in the Middle East has failed. The region has become progressively more unstable and violent under U.S. military hegemony. In 1998, it suffered from five armed conflicts. By 2019, 22 violent struggles had engulfed the area.¹ This unadmirable result is perhaps not surprising. Though Washington has ostensibly sought stability, its policies do not appear to be centered around that objective. Rather than acting as an impartial arbiter, America's military presence in the region has been justified on the grounds of deterring, balancing, and defeating "bad actors" – from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Iran. This has frequently made the United States a direct belligerent in conflicts involving these nations and groups. Over time, the entire organizing principle of America's Middle East policy has morphed into "confronting Iran" regardless of the destabilizing effects of this policy on the region. By imposing society-collapsing sanctions on non-compliant states while selling billions of dollars' worth of arms to its security partners, U.S. hegemony has tended to exacerbate the very factors that have made the region unstable.

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As the political will to uphold Pax Americana withers, new thinking has started to emerge in Washington. Jake Sullivan, President Joe Biden's national security advisor, and Daniel Benaim, also a close adviser to Biden, put forward a new vision for the United States in the Middle East in Foreign Affairs in May 2020. Sullivan and Benaim focused on fostering much-needed intraregional dialogue,

¹ Pettersson, Therése, and Magnus Öberg. "Organized Violence, 1989–2019." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (July 2020), 597–613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320934986>.

though they stopped short of calling for the establishment of a new regional security organization (primarily so as to avoid facing the question of whether Israel should or shouldn't be included).²

The Sullivan–Benaim proposal is much-welcomed. Crucially, it recognizes that U.S. conduct has given its strategic partners, i.e., countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, “a blank check for destabilizing behavior and keeps the region on the brink of wider conflict.” Moreover, the authors favor an reduction of America’s military footprint in the region that would not be conditioned on the outcomes of exploratory regional negotiations. While they don’t support a full withdrawal of U.S. forces, Sullivan and Benaim seek to discard the notion that the U.S. troop presence in the region signals engagement or staying power. “Too often, we default to adding more troops to the region as an answer to proving that we’re engaged,” Sullivan explained at an event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in June 2020.³

Sullivan and Benaim’s push for more regional diplomacy “where the protagonists are the regional actors themselves” is crucial precisely because much of the resistance to the idea of a new security arrangement for the Persian Gulf has come from the United States itself. In part this opposition reflects skepticism about the region’s readiness for such an undertaking; there is also a reluctance to give up whatever semblance of control military domination of the area has provided the United States.

Concern that the region as a whole is not sufficiently prepared for this endeavor is justified. Most of America’s security partners in the Persian Gulf prefer that the United States continue to balance and contain Iran, which they consider their main rival. They have strongly opposed any hint of a security arrangement that

² Benaim, Daniel, and Jake Sullivan. “America’s Opportunity in the Middle East.” *Foreign Affairs*. May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126062>.

³ Center for Strategic and International Studies. U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East. June 23, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/online-event-us-grand-strategy-middle-east>.

includes Iran and reduces America's military commitment to the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Tehran's vision of a security arrangement for the region appears to exclude the United States — a nonstarter for most Persian Gulf states.

Nevertheless, focus on this evident lack of readiness misses a more profound structural challenge: The United States' military dominance disincentivizes many regional states from demanding an inclusive security arrangement — or even preparing themselves for it. Troop levels are clearly relevant, but they are a function of a more important decision: Should the United States seek to dominate and lead the region, or reduce its military footprint in the Persian Gulf? For many of America's security partners, even a dysfunctional Pax Americana is preferable to the compromises that creating a security architecture would inevitably necessitate. Only if the United States begins a military withdrawal that credibly signals it is no longer determined to sustain hegemony can the preconditions for creating a successful security architecture emerge.

An idea whose time has come

Conventional wisdom holds that U.S. forces in the Middle East in general, and the Persian Gulf in particular, make America and these regions more secure. In reality, U.S. military dominance of the area and voluminous arms sales and support for repressive regimes help drive instability and make America less safe.

⁴ The region has been the global epicenter of the overreach of U.S. power, the unwarranted taking of sides in local and regional conflicts, and a loss of vision about where U.S. interests lie. This has been a systemic problem in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East since at least the end of the Cold War; it is not limited to any one administration.

⁴ For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Paul Pillar *et al.* "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination." *Quincy Papers*. No. 2, July 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/?p=2924>.

To date, America’s war on terror – which vastly expanded its military presence in the Middle East – has cost well over \$6.4 trillion.⁵ The single costliest instance of U.S. overreach in the region, the war in Iraq that began in 2003, cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, thousands of American deaths, and trillions of dollars in expenditures, to say nothing of the political harm the invasion caused.⁶ It did not produce even remotely comparable benefits. The negative longer-term consequences of the U.S.–led invasion include triggering an extended civil war, stimulating sectarian conflict inside and outside Iraq, causing massive refugee flows, and producing the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State, or ISIS.⁷

The present approach to the Middle East is driven by flawed assumptions as to the utility of coercive power in two areas long considered central to U.S. interests: countering terrorism and protecting the free flow of global commerce. Contrary to Washington’s conventional wisdom, terrorism is not an existential threat to the United States. It receives disproportionate attention relative to the actual danger it poses.⁸ Nor do terrorists need to hold territory to be able to operate. This false assumption prompted the invasion of several Middle Eastern countries to deny terrorist organizations “safe havens.” Washington also falsely believed that military interventions could contain terrorist threats, whereas, in reality, the U.S. military presence and operations abroad are the foremost drivers of anti–U.S. terrorism.

Another crucial mistake has been Washington’s strategy of centering counterterrorism on war. Most terrorist organizations are defeated not by military

⁵ Crawford, Neta C. “United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post–9/11 Wars Through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion.” *Costs of War Project Papers*. November 13, 2019. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2019/united-states-budgetary-costs-and-obligations-post-911-wars-through-fy2020-64-trillion>.

⁶ Garrett–Peltier, Heidi. “War Spending and Lost Opportunities.” *Costs of War Project Papers*. March 26, 2019. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2019/war-spending-and-lost-opportunities>.

⁷ Nesser, Petter. “Jihadism in Western Europe after the Invasion of Iraq: Tracing Motivational Influences from the Iraq war on Jihadist Terrorism in Western Europe.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Vol. 29, No. 4 (2006), 323–342.

⁸ By comparison, climate change causes 400,000 deaths globally each year, while terrorism caused less than 16,000 deaths in 2018. James Goldgeier and Bruce W. Jentleson. “The United States Is Not Entitled to Lead the World.” *Foreign Affairs*. September 25, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126476>.

operations but by police and intelligence actions. With few effective military targets, the principal harm of such operations is that they inevitably inflict injury and death on innocent civilians, which becomes another source of anger and resentment that feeds extremism and still more terrorism.⁹

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Oil is the other factor. The roughly 55,000 U.S. troops currently stationed in the Persian Gulf are partly there to protect oil supplies — a task the United States has taken upon itself since President Carter promulgated the Carter Doctrine in 1980, which designated the Persian Gulf vital to American interests. As time passed, the United States has reduced its dependence on Persian Gulf oil but has continued to shoulder the cost of “protecting” the commodity.¹⁰ While it is not sustainable for the United States to continue to shoulder the full cost of protection, there are also question marks as to whether the U.S. military’s presence has contributed to the stability of oil supplies or the stability of oil markets. In truth, justifying the current U.S. force posture in the Persian Gulf based on protecting oil supplies and keeping markets stable is precarious at best.

Given the manifest failure of the current strategy, growing calls for a demilitarized approach to the region should be no surprise. Nor should the

⁹ Paul Pillar et al. *Op cit.*, 13.

¹⁰ In 2018, the United States spent approximately \$81 billion protecting global oil supplies; this represented 13 percent of the Defence Department’s base budget for the year. That same year, only 15 percent of America’s petroleum imports came from the Persian Gulf. In contrast, 40 percent of China’s oil imports are from the Middle East, while 76 percent of the oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz in 2017 went to Asian markets more broadly. Securing America’s Future Energy. “The Military Cost of Defending Global Oil Supplies.” *SAFE Issue Briefs*. September 21, 2018, <https://secureenergy.org/?p=4027>. Robert Rapier. “How Much Oil Do We Import from the Middle East?” *Forbes*. January 7, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2020/01/07/how-much-oil-do-we-import-from-the-middle-east>; Justine Barden. “The Strait of Hormuz Is the World’s Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint.” *Today in Energy*. June 20, 2019. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>.

American people's war fatigue and increasing demands that Washington end these "endless wars." Indeed, firmly shifting attitudes among the American electorate render the continuation of Pax Americana in the Persian Gulf challenging to sustain. A small minority of Americans, roughly 20 percent, still believes that the United States should intervene militarily to stop human rights abuses overseas. The majority is skeptical of "humanitarian intervention," according to a September 2020 poll by the Eurasia Group Foundation, and prefers that the United States first focuses on America's "own domestic human rights problems such as mass incarceration and aggressive policing." Even a majority of Donald Trump's supporters hold this view, the poll found.¹¹

Moreover, the poll shows that American exceptionalism — an intellectual precondition for the idea of benign American hegemony — is fast losing support among Americans, particularly the younger generation. More than half of 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed believe America "is not an exceptional nation." The generational gap here is stark: Only a quarter of Americans over the age of 60 reject American exceptionalism.¹²

Other polls confirm these trends. A Charles Koch Institute poll shows that only 7 percent of the American populace favors a more militarily active foreign policy. In contrast, a plurality, 48 percent, think the United States should be less militarily engaged in the world. Not surprisingly, then, about three-quarters of U.S. adults support bringing troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. More than six times as many Americans support rather than oppose the Trump administration's 2020 agreement with the Taliban. Perhaps most importantly, these numbers do not change dramatically between Trump and Biden supporters.¹³

¹¹ Hannah, Mark, and Caroline Gray. *Diplomacy & Restraint: The Worldview of American Voters*. Eurasia Group Foundation. September 2020. 4. <https://egfound.org/?p=705>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kheel, Rebecca. "Poll: About Three Quarters Support Bringing Troops Home from Iraq, Afghanistan." *The Hill*. August 6, 2020. <https://thehill.com/node/510851>.

Promises to end America's endless wars are now heard on all political sides in the United States. Nearly all Democratic presidential contenders committed to ending these wars during the 2020 primary, and many vowed to bring home all combat troops from the Middle East.¹⁴ Similarly, Trump distinguished himself from the other Republican primary candidates back in 2016 by slamming the decision to go to war in Iraq and presenting himself as the antiwar candidate. While many thought this would be a losing proposition, it proved crucial to his electoral success.¹⁵

Washington falsely believed that military interventions could contain terrorist threats, whereas, in reality, the U.S. military presence and operations abroad are the foremost drivers of anti-U.S. terrorism.

These factors have helped make an inclusive security arrangement for the Persian Gulf an old idea whose time has arrived. Sullivan and Benaim correctly point out that the Middle East remains the “most dangerously underinstitutionalized region.”¹⁶ Without any inclusive structures – formal or informal – responsible for managing, containing, and, at times, resolving the region's many quarrels, while also checking regional rivalries and preventing them from turning violent, the instability that has come to characterize the region is somewhat of a foregone conclusion.

¹⁴ Burns, Robert. “Campaign: Warren’s Call to Exit Mideast Means Combat Troops.” The Associated Press. October 15, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/63a265c232cd4b9e9d70d86f9b34de42>.

¹⁵ Prokop, Andrew. “Donald Trump Issued a Remarkably Blunt Denunciation of the Iraq War During the Debate.” Vox. December 16, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/16/10296032/donald-trump-gop-debate-iraq-war>; J.D. Vance. “Why Trump’s Antiwar Message Resonates with White America.” *The New York Times*. April 4, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trumps-antiwar-message-resonates-with-white-america.html>.

¹⁶ Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan. Op cit.

Pax Americana vs. inclusive security

While Washington warms to the idea of an inclusive security dialogue, circumstances in the region remain problematic. Though the conditions and norms necessary to make a security arrangement successful and durable are largely missing, most of these cannot be expected to exist prior to constructing this architecture. Instead, they will come into existence through the deliberations that establish the new security arrangement. For instance, norms such as noninterference in other states' internal affairs, or a taboo against the pursuit of regime-change in neighboring countries, are notoriously weak in the Middle East. Similarly, virtually all major powers in the region engage in funding and supporting armed nonstate actors in other countries, though few as extensively and successfully as Iran.

The strengthening of norms of noninterference cannot constitute preconditions for the pursuit of a new security architecture. Instead, the adoption and strengthening of these norms should be on the agenda, together with mechanisms to regulate and limit military buildups and expenditures, as the security arrangement is negotiated. Such an arms control component of the agreement would have to address ballistic missile programs as well as the use of paramilitary groups.

Other necessary changes in the conduct of Persian Gulf states do not pertain to particular activities but rather to the very conception of security and the principles for ordering the region. A common perspective in Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates is to divide the region between Arab and non-Arab states. Statements critical of Iran and Turkey often focus on their alleged interference in Arab affairs. "The Turkish interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries is a clear example of negative interference in the region," the UAE's foreign minister,

Anwar Gargash, recently charged.¹⁷ The Saudi foreign minister, Ibrahim al-Assaf, and other Saudi officials regularly make similar charges about Iran. “One of the most dangerous forms of terrorism and extremism is what Iran practices through its blatant interference in Arab affairs,” al-Assaf told the Arab League in 2019.¹⁸

The emphasis on Arab affairs may appear benign but has profound implications. It suggests that Saudi Arabia – which kidnapped, Saad al-Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister, in 2017, has contributed in Yemen to what the United Nations considers the world’s worst humanitarian disaster, intervened militarily in Bahrain to crack down on dissidents, and was on the verge of invading Qatar to overthrow its government – can engage in these activities legitimately by virtue of its ethnic Arab makeup.¹⁹ At the same time, Turkey and Iran are, by definition, rendered illegitimate actors by virtue of their non-Arab composition. (Going forward, Riyadh may have to make an exception for Israel, which otherwise would fall into the same category as Turkey and Iran.) Under this mindset, a shared history, cultural ties, borders, and trade do not provide avenues for influence (positive or negative) – only the ethnic identity of the state does. While such a racist division of the region may serve Saudi Arabia’s bid for regional leadership by disqualifying its non-Arab rivals by default, the refusal to recognize the legitimacy of other states based on ethnicity is not conducive to the creation of an inclusive security arrangement. Iran’s refusal to recognize Israel presents a similar dilemma.

These conceptions add to a reluctance among some Persian Gulf states to support an inclusive security architecture for the region. For many of these

¹⁷ Hearst, David. “A New Message Resounds in the Arab World: Get Ankara.” *Middle East Eye*. September 12, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/185006>.

¹⁸ Aboudi, Sami. “Tunisia Says It Will Coordinate Arab Response to U.S. Move on Golan.” Reuters. March 29, 2019. <https://reut.rs/2HNWJIY>.

¹⁹ Kheel, Rebecca. “Saudi Crown Prince Jokes About Kidnapping Lebanese Leader.” *The Hill*. October 24, 2018. <https://thehill.com/node/412930>; Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman. “Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest.” *The New York Times*. March 14, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>; Andrew England. “World’s Worst Humanitarian Crisis Deepens as Coronavirus Hits Yemen.” *Financial Times*. April 10, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/507d62b9-7d11-438c-805a-09cfff6d69b>; Alex Emmons. “Saudi Arabia Planned to Invade Qatar Last Summer. Rex Tillerson’s Efforts to Stop It May Have Cost Him His Job.” *The Intercept*. August 1, 2018. <https://interc.pt/2LF3oRw>.

states, the continuation of Pax Americana offers a far more attractive option: The United States tips the regional balance in their favor, affords them a security umbrella, contains and weakens their regional rivals, obviates any need for compromise with their regional foes – and, all the while, hands the bill to the American taxpayer. In the words of Robert Gates, the former U.S. defense secretary, the Saudis want to “fight the Iranians to the last American.”²⁰ Binding the United States to their own security and political ambitions has, as a result, been imperative. These states watch with trepidation the shifting of political winds in Washington away from the United States acting as a world policeman and sustaining an infrastructure of more than 800 military bases and facilities worldwide. “Bringing the troops home” is equivalent to a call to abandon America’s Persian Gulf security partners, in their view.

Their harsh reactions to any sign or measure that could conceivably weaken Washington’s commitment to their security and ambitions are revealing. Saudi Arabia and the UAE (along with Israel) viewed the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, less as an arms control agreement and more as a measure that would allow the United States to pivot to Asia and cease its three-decades-old role as a counterbalance to Iranian power. American officials were baffled to hear some Arab officials view the agreement as a first step toward abandoning the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf in favor of a renewed U.S.–Iran alliance, akin to what existed during the time of the shah. After all, the agreement would end Iran’s political and economic isolation and terminate Washington’s policy of containing Iran, all the while facilitating an American military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. The details of the nuclear agreement were not their primary concern. In the words of Michael Morell, acting director of the Central Intelligence Agency under President Obama: “If I was going to put my finger on the single most important factor that explains the

²⁰ Lynch, Marc. “Gates: Saudis Want to Fight Iran to the Last American.” *Foreign Policy*. December 1, 2010. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/01/gates-saudis-want-to-fight-iran-to-the-last-american>.

largest number of actions that are taking place in the region today, it is the widespread perception of American withdrawal."²¹

These Saudi, Emirati, and Israeli fears have not been limited to the presidency of Barack Obama, under whose watch the JCPOA was negotiated and concluded. President Trump, who took American deference toward these autocratic regimes to new levels, further intensified nervousness in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi about America's commitment to their security. Two events in the summer and fall of 2019 confirmed their fears.

Recognizing that the U.S. military was no longer at their disposal, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began exercising diplomatic options they had earlier shunned.

After a tense summer with mysterious attacks against oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, most likely at the hand of Iran, Tehran shot down an American spy plane it claimed had entered its airspace. At first, Trump approved retaliatory strikes against targets in Iran, but he reversed his order at the last moment and instead directed a cyberattack against Iran. The reversal stunned the world as well as America's security partners in the region. John Bolton, the hawkish U.S. national security advisor and ardent supporter of war with Iran, was devastated by Trump's decision.²² Three months later, a spectacular drone attack against Saudi refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais, in the eastern part of the country, disrupted more than half of Saudi Arabia's oil production for several weeks. Though a U.N. investigation could not confirm Iran's involvement in the attack, Saudi officials

²¹ Parsi, Trita. "John Bolton Can Stomach Kim Jong Un's North Korea, but Not Iran." *Foreign Policy*. June 25, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/25/bolton-book-netanyahu-pompeo-undermine-us-iran-interests-israel-saudi-arabia>. See also Trita Parsi. *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran and the Triumph of Diplomacy*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. 2017; "Biggest factor in U.S.–Middle East relations is perception that U.S. is withdrawing." CBS News. January 6, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biggest-factor-in-u-s-middle-east-relations-is-perception-that-u-s-is-withdrawing/>

²² Hudson, John. "Diverging Worldviews Long Haunted Trump–Bolton Relationship." *Washington Post*. September 10, 2019. <https://wapo.st/2UMvnjg>.

had no doubt about the culprit's identity. They expected the United States to come to their defense.²³

Once again, Trump showed little interest in starting a war with Iran on behalf of the Saudis, causing Middle East officials and much of the Washington foreign policy establishment alike to accuse him of having abandoned the Carter Doctrine.²⁴ Rather than the Middle East descending into chaos, as proponents of Pax Americana had predicted, Persian Gulf states began exploring regional diplomacy.²⁵ Recognizing that the U.S. military was no longer at their disposal, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began exercising diplomatic options they had earlier shunned. Saudi officials quietly reached out to Iran via intermediaries seeking ways to ease tensions. Tehran, in turn, floated a peace plan based on a mutual Iranian–Saudi pledge of nonaggression. Riyadh also stepped up direct talks with Houthi rebels in Yemen to ease tensions with their backer, Iran.²⁶

Abu Dhabi went even further. The UAE started withdrawing troops from Yemen and opened direct talks with Tehran over maritime security. It even released \$700 million in funds to Iran in contradiction to the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy.²⁷ While the calculation behind these measures might have been tactical, it is nevertheless noteworthy that as the United States showed military restraint, its erstwhile allies tilted toward diplomacy. The Saudis and Emiratis simply had no choice but to reverse their rejection of diplomacy because they could no longer presume they operated under the protection of the United

²³ "Saudi Arabia Oil Attacks: UN 'Unable to Confirm Iranian Involvement.'" BBC News. December 11, 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50742224>.

²⁴ Brands, Hal, Steven A. Cook, and Kenneth M. Pollack. "RIP the Carter Doctrine, 1980–2019." *Foreign Policy*. December 13, 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/15/carter-doctrine-rip-donald-trump-mideast-oil-big-think>.

²⁵ Brands, Hal. "How to Make the Middle East Even Worse? A U.S. Withdrawal." Bloomberg. October 9, 2018.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-10-09/how-to-make-the-middle-east-even-worse-a-u-s-withdrawal>; Trita Parsi,

"The Middle East Is More Stable When the United States Stays Away." *Foreign Policy*. January 6, 2020.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/06/the-middle-east-is-more-stable-when-the-united-states-stays-away>.

²⁶ Walsh, Declan, and Ben Hubbard. "With U.S. Help No Longer Assured, Saudis Try a New Strategy: Talks." *The New York Times*.

December 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/26/world/middleeast/saudi-iran-qatar-talks.html>; Benoit Faucon, Summer

Said, and Warren P. Strobel. "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Ease Tensions With Iran." *The Wall Street Journal*. December 12, 2019.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-to-ease-tensions-with-iran-11576178194>; Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard. "Saudi

Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War." *The New York Times*. October 4, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html>.

²⁷ "UAE Releases \$700m of Iranian Funds." *Middle East Monitor*. October 21, 2019.

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191021-uae-releases-700-million-of-iranian-funds>.

States. With the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, however, the pendulum once again swung in the direction of confrontation and away from diplomacy, courtesy of American military intervention.

These developments suggest that Saudi and Emirati opposition to an inclusive regional dialogue can be allayed. As long as the United States remains committed to intervening in the region militarily, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi tend to prefer an aggressive posture intended to direct U.S. power toward weakening and defeating Iran. Once Washington convincingly demonstrates its disinclination to get involved in an armed confrontation with Tehran, the Saudis and Emiratis adjust accordingly and begin exploring diplomacy to secure their interests through more peaceful coexistence with their northern rival.

Consequently, openness to and readiness for an inclusive security architecture is likely to emerge only when the United States clearly has abandoned all ambitions to dominate the Persian Gulf.

Sullivan and Benaim recognize this as well and view it as an opportunity. The realization that the Americans are “not going to be our saviors” is compelling Saudi Arabia and the UAE to take regional diplomacy much more seriously and “to take matters into their own hands to a more significant degree,” according to Sullivan.²⁸

²⁸ CSIS. *Op cit.* <https://www.csis.org/analysis/online-event-us-grand-strategy-middle-east>.

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The recent normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE is best understood in this context - as a counter to this trend. It is not so much a peace deal as it is an arms deal – and an implicit defense pact. The UAE gets access to the United States’ most advanced fighter jet, the F-35, in return for normalizing relations with Israel while further binding the United States to Abu Dhabi’s security. Arab states in the Gulf Cooperation Council have long treated American weaponry purchases as informal defense arrangements that oblige the United States to protect them militarily. Of course, positioning the Emirati–Israeli accord as an anti–Iran move also reinforces America’s status-quo military commitment to the Middle East. The notion that the threat from Iran is so overwhelming that it compelled the UAE to strike a deal with Israel is belied by the fact that Abu Dhabi is far more embroiled in countering Ankara’s regional ambitions and Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Emiratis define as their primary political enemy.²⁹

Iran, in turn, poses a different set of challenges. Its official rhetoric calls for the United States to exit the region altogether. A security architecture should be created and sustained by the Persian Gulf alone, Tehran maintains. To the other states in the Persian Gulf, this is a nonstarter for the same reason Tehran finds it preferable: With the United States removed from the Persian Gulf, the path will open for Iran to become the dominant power in these waters (as it was during the time of the shah). However, given the Persian Gulf’s importance in the global

²⁹ Parsi, Trita. “The Israel–UAE Deal Puts the ‘Forever’ in ‘Forever War.’” *The New Republic*. August 20, 2020. <https://newrepublic.com/article/159010/trump-israel-iran-mideast-forever-war>.

economy, Tehran has little choice but to accept a role for outside powers in any inclusive security architecture. Getting to this point may prove less arduous than Iran's official statements suggest. Senior Iranian officials privately concede that the architecture will have dim chances of success without the support and approval of the United States and possibly other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. However, the proposition has not been tested, since a serious effort at creating an inclusive security arrangement has yet to be undertaken.

A truly inclusive security architecture

Given the will to move forward, the vital issues that Persian Gulf states would initially need to agree on are whether to build on existing organizations and structures or set up an entirely new institution. They would also have to determine the organization's scope, ambition, and, finally, its membership. Starting with humble ambitions limited to kickstarting diplomacy without any formal structures, as Sullivan and Benaim suggest, may be wise in the interim. But in the longer term, diplomatic activity needs to be institutionalized.

The diplomacy deficit in the Persian Gulf region is notorious. Except for the Gulf Cooperation Council, there are no multinational security organizations. But building upon the GCC may be unwise, if this is even possible, as it suffers from numerous flaws. It was conceived as a defense pact against Iraq and Iran rather than an inclusive organization with a cooperation-oriented mission and purpose. Its *raison d'être* has been premised primarily on the existence of an external threat that member states unite against. Moreover, it is paralyzed by internal conflicts, mainly the standoff between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their partners on the one hand, and Qatar on the other. Though the blockade against Qatar imposed in mid-2017 has been lifted, the underlying causes of their dispute remain unresolved.

A new security architecture has a better chance of succeeding if it instead is inspired by successful, security-enhancing institutions in other regions, such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Though these are vastly different organizations, they are inclusive and cooperation-oriented rather than premised on the need to balance a common threat. Moreover, by sidestepping the GCC, the new initiative will also evade much of its divisive baggage.

In terms of scope and purpose, ASEAN's more soft-security focus — disaster-relief cooperation and humanitarian assistance — might be an easier lift initially for the Persian Gulf states but is likely to prove insufficient in the long run. Equally, the OSCE's all-encompassing approach — from confidence-building measures to human rights promotion to hard security issues — may be too ambitious at first. Still, it should be the organization's long-term objective to promote cooperation on all such issues. Combating drug trafficking and pandemics, environmental issues, maritime security, and pilgrimage-security agreements are all challenges on which collaboration may be relatively forthcoming. Eventually, however, the region's hard security challenges must be addressed: defense expenditures, weapons acquisition, foreign bases, limits on ballistic missiles, and the use and arming of militias, to name a few such questions.

The composition of the new security organization is another crucial issue. For the Persian Gulf states to have a sense of ownership, which is essential to the success of any such endeavor, they have to lead it themselves rather than rely on the United States or other major powers to drive it. However, curtailing Washington's instinct to always lead and control diplomatic mechanisms will be challenging. Simultaneously, without buy-in and support from major powers, regional powers will likely prove unable to negotiate the new security architecture

successfully. Including the United States risks pushing Iran to opt out; not including the United States will compel most GCC monarchies to disengage.

This new approach would not mean disengaging from the Persian Gulf but would instead prioritize diplomatic and economic involvement over military hegemony, military interventions, and arms sales.

The solution may lie in expanding external involvement beyond the United States. One option would be to provide observer status to all permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, the P5. This approach would anchor the security architecture in the international system's existing structures and likely reduce objections and hesitation from all sides. Sullivan and Benaim have signaled openness to this idea.³⁰ Another option would be to anchor it in a combination of the P5, some EU member states in the form of "lead groups," and the Asian powers with the most significant stake in Persian Gulf security due to their dependence on its energy supplies. On the one hand, coordination on the Iran nuclear file between the EU's foreign policy institutions (e.g., the European External Action Service) and the so-called E3 – France, Germany, and the United Kingdom – could represent a form of European involvement in and contribution to the new security organization. On the other hand, India, Japan, and South Korea (in addition to China) are the most significant importers of Persian Gulf gas and oil. Their own tensions and rivalries risk turning the Persian Gulf into an arena for their geopolitical competition in coming decades. Including them in the security architecture can help strengthen the arrangement and dilute the influence of the U.S. and China while protecting the region from inter-Asian geopolitical rivalries in the future.

³⁰ Benaim and Sullivan. *Op cit.* <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126062>.

Conclusion: A new role for the United States

To credibly signal and demonstrate commitment to supporting a new regional dialogue and to help develop the conditions that will incentivize regional states to invest in this strategy for peace and stability, the United States should take the following steps, all of which lie squarely in its national interest.

Abandon dominance. Few developments in the Middle East genuinely threaten America's core interests: protecting the United States from attacks and facilitating the free flow of global commerce. Neither warrants a significant U.S. military presence in the Middle East, let alone regional military dominance. Even preventing hostile domination by a rival major power does not mean the United States must play the role of hegemon, nor does it require the current level of U.S. arms sales to America's strategic partners. Instead, Washington should appreciate that multipolarity precludes regional domination by any other state. This new approach would not mean disengaging from the Persian Gulf but would instead prioritize diplomatic and economic involvement over military hegemony, military interventions, and arms sales. As Sullivan and Benaim indirectly acknowledge, past protection of U.S. security partners such as Saudi Arabia disincentivized them from investing in regional diplomacy. Ending America's posture of dominance, its *cartes blanches* for partners, and a significant reduction of U.S. troop levels will help instill greater restraint and remove obstacles to renewed Persian Gulf dialogue.³¹

Encourage regional dialogue but let the region lead. The incoming Biden administration's hint that it may seek an inclusive security dialogue in the Persian Gulf is a welcome first step toward shifting the burden of the region's security to

³¹ At CSIS in June 2020, Jake Sullivan stated the following: "I would also say, though, that Saudis kind of looked at all that [Trump's refusal to defend Saudi Arabia from attacks from Iran], probably also didn't want the United States to be starting a war with Iran, but also recognized, 'Geez, these guys are not going to be our saviors.' We've got to think differently about how we approach the issue of Iran writ large in the region. That's part of the reason that I believe we actually have a potential diplomatic opportunity, narrow as the window may be in the coming months and years." "U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East." CSIS. June 23, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/online-event-us-grand-strategy-middle-east>.

the regional states themselves. While it can start off as a structured regional dialogue, the long-term objective should be to institutionalize the dialogue through a new organization tasked with managing regional stability. For such an effort to be successful, the United States should play a supporting role while letting the regional states themselves take the lead. This will ensure greater ownership of the process and the outcome – which, in turn, is necessary to make the new security arrangement durable.

Include other major powers. The regional dialogue should include the five permanent members of the Security Council as well as major Asian powers with a strong interest in stability in the Persian Gulf. Including them in the security architecture can help strengthen the arrangement and dilute the roles played by the United States and China while protecting the region from inter-Asian geopolitical rivalries in the future.