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**Gulf Security and Minilateralism:
The Potential, the Problems, and the Prospects**
Matthew Gray

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Abstract

The Persian Gulf subregion is deeply contested political terrain. Attempts by states in the region to engage with each other and with states further afield have traditionally been conducted through either bilateral means, with attendant problems and, at times, controversies, or through multilateral mechanisms, which in both the Gulf region and especially the wider Middle East have proven to be of very limited utility and effectiveness. The Gulf has very little security architecture of which to speak, and even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), notwithstanding some successes, has proven limited as a platform for dialogue, conflict resolution, and confidence-building. This paper is a preliminary attempt to examine whether minilateralism may be a means of future security and economic engagement by and with the states of the Gulf. It takes minilateralism to be, most typically, specific, flexible, and informal arrangements involving three or more states and established to address a specific threat, issue, or possibility. Minilateralism has become a more common process in other parts of the world—especially Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-Pacific—meaning that it is likely to gain attention in the Gulf, and probably experimented with by policymakers there as well. This paper, working from that assumption and as a first conjecture on the topic, asks what potential minilateralism might possess, what risks or issues it may create, and what its ultimate prospects may be.

Short biography

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Gulf Security and Minilateralism: The Potential, the Problems, and the Prospects

Introduction.

The Persian Gulf subregion is deeply contested geoeconomic and geopolitical terrain. Like the broader Middle East of which it is a part, control of it and its resources has been contested by major powers since the earliest times. In modern times, the emergence of the regional state system coincided with the development of oil into the world's most important geoeconomic resource and with the Cold War, which sustained the interest of external powers. For regional leaderships, the Gulf is also a contested arena, and both leaders and the state institutions under them have sought to shape and reshape the security environment and their strategic position within it, creating a “distinct regional security complex” that has seen both internal and external forces and a hierarchy of interests create the structures and drivers of change there.¹

Concomitant with this, and in substantial part because of it, the Gulf lacks an effective security architecture that incorporates all of the eight littoral Gulf states and which engages them across military, economic, human, environmental and all other elements of security. This has created a perennially competitive environment. Many states have sought to make bilateral arrangements with a major power (especially, in recent decades, the United States), while others, such as post-revolutionary Iran and Iraq over 1990-2003, have pursued an alternative security posture, at times hostile towards the US and its regional allies. Bilateralism has thus been a dominant arrangement between states, but this has done nothing at the subregional level to improve overall security perceptions. Meanwhile, multilateralism has fared even worse, with multilateral bodies being at best toothless and riven by their own rivalries and mistrust, and at worst failing outright.

The question that arises from this—hardly a new one—is: What alternatives remain? If both multilateralism and bilateralism have served certain regimes' interests at certain times, but have not created any effective security architecture and even undermined subregional stability at times, what other security avenues might be available? Are there security trends at a global level which might flow on to the region in the coming years and serve as alternatives to bilateralism and multilateralism? This paper investigates the place that “minilateralism” may claim, or which may be claimed for it, in the Gulf, taking “minilateralism” to mean, most typically, a specific and informal arrangement involving three or more

1- Kamrava, M. *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf*, Cornell University Press, 2018, pp. 34-35.

states to address a specific threat, issue, or possibility.² Although minilateralism and multilateralism may involve similar numbers of states, the former is typically smaller and more exclusive, more flexible, and more targeted in its goals.³

The Gulf states have made only extremely limited use of minilateral arrangements in the past, and the scholarly literature on the subregion has given it almost no consideration. Yet, this paper posits that minilateralism is becoming increasingly important elsewhere, including in the Indo-Pacific region adjacent to the Gulf. It investigates whether minilateralism might in due course be adopted in the Gulf, including to what extent, what might be involved or required, and what challenges may confront it. Although minilateralism is only a nascent concept and many elements of it remain a matter for conjecture, it is now an appropriate time to begin asking such questions and to prompt the debates that they are likely to create.

The minilateralism concept in theory and practice.

Minilateralism in both theory and (post-World War II) practice has typically been framed within the context of multilateralism: “international governance of the ‘many,’” with principles often framed by the United States and opposed to, or seeking to outmanoeuvre, bilateral or exclusionary frameworks.⁴ The period from 1945 to the end of the twentieth century loosely correlated with a high point in multilateralism: a “progressive shift away from bilateral and hegemonic regimes, in which relations among states are compartmentalized into dyads and obligations are specific to each dyad, toward multilateral regimes.”⁵ Multilateralism appealed because of the enormous rewards it promised, and its potential to limit the major power dominance that characterized many previous bilateral arrangements and its consistency with the emerging norm of equality among states.⁶ It had certain successes. Some might point to the United Nations, for all its faults and limitations, having successes in at least some security initiatives, such as the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Other bodies established and important in the same period include the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)

2- Tow, W. T. “Minilateral security’s relevance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: challenges and prospects,” *The Pacific Review*, 32:2 (2019), p. 235.

3- This point has been made quite widely, but see for example Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, “Introduction: Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific,” in Singh, B. and Teo, S (eds), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, Routledge, 2020, pp. 4-5.

4- Kahler, M. “Multilateralism with small and large numbers,” *International Organization*, 46:3 (1992), p. 681.

5- Ruggie, J. R. “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” *International Organization*, 46:3 (1992), pp. 561-598, cited in Verdier, D. “Multilateralism, Bilateralism, and Exclusion in the Nuclear Proliferation Regime,” *International Organization*, 62:3 (2008), p. 440.

6- Kahler, “Multilateralism with small and large numbers,” p. 681.

and its successor, the World Trade Organization (WTO). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are further, more specific but also high profile, examples.

However, multilateralism is not without its weaknesses, problems, and critics. Multilateral bodies tend towards disagreement and conflict, loosely correlating to their size and ambitions, which have long hindered their achievements, while more recent trends in both international power and domestic politics threaten support for multilateral initiatives. As new powers have emerged in the twenty-first century, many have proven uninterested in, or even opposed to, many of the norms of liberal institutionalism. Bodies that require consensus or something close to it have long struggled to reach agreement on major initiatives, but—the argument goes—this could become even more pronounced as Russia, China, and other powers eschew approaches or proposals that they see as tied to an outdated, western-dominated order or which might undermine their growing influence. As they build relationships with smaller states, the inclusiveness of multilateralism might, therefore, also prove a weakness. At the same time, segments of the populations in western democracies have also turned against processes such as globalization that, to them, are linked to multilateralism,⁷ or have come to see ambitious regional arrangements as requiring an unreasonable surrender of sovereignty or as being inconsistent with their values. The politics behind Brexit is an example of this latter trend,⁸ and former US President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was based on similar politics.

How convincing is the claim that there is a global shift away from multilateralism? At first glance, it would seem to have some merit, but the debate is an ongoing one in international relations, broadly demarcating the constructivist and realist schools.⁹ Multilateralism retains its proponents because of its inclusiveness and legitimacy, and where strides are successfully made, the effectiveness and impact of these.¹⁰ At the same time, the post-1945 international environment has not been short of examples of bilateralism. The bipolar order during the Cold War naturally lent itself to bilateralism, which gained it attention among scholars, not least of all those focused on the Middle East. In many regions, bilateral arrangements between the United States and specific regional actors often dominated the security landscape, reflecting a US preference for such arrangements and often

7- Brunnée, J. "Multilateralism in Crisis," *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting*, 112 (2018), pp. 337-338.

8- See William Magnuson, "Is Brexit the beginning of the end for international cooperation?" *The Conversation*, 30 March 2017. <https://theconversation.com/is-brexit-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-international-cooperation-70865>.

9- Verdier, "Multilateralism, Bilateralism, and Exclusion," pp. 439-440.

10- Kwakwa, E. "The Future of Multilateralism," *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting*, 112 (2018), p. 339

weak security architecture in these regions. Thus in East Asia, as an example, the Cold War security setting was dominated by US bilateral relationships with key states such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, and in the case of the Middle East, by Washington's relationships with Israel, Turkey, (post-1970s) Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and pre-revolutionary Iran. These relationships mostly grew out of the Cold War, or at the least were strengthened by its imperatives and US policy towards them, and in most cases these bilateral relationships remain crucially important to the present day, even if the Cold War manoeuvring that once informed them has since been replaced by shared interests in other regional security issues, counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, trade, and the like.

Between bilateralism and multilateralism—but arguably with a closer connection to the latter—sits minilateralism. Early observations of minilateralism tended to conflate it with multilateralism, or simply took very small arrangements such as trilateral ones to be, in effect, a case of minilateralism. While there is a simple shared feature of these, insofar as they consist of more than two states as parties, minilateralism is more than just a subset of multilateralism.¹¹ Typically and importantly, it is “a narrower and usually informal initiative intended to address a specific threat, contingency or security issues with fewer states [than multilateralism] sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time.”¹²

This is only a starting point for the concept, however, and is a somewhat loose typology. The precise number of parties is not strictly defined, beyond it being more than two: Naím, in an influential early work, stressed that it should be “the smallest possible number needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem,” and came up with a “magic number” of around twenty,¹³ while others have suggested groupings of only three or four are both more common and most ideal.¹⁴ Regardless, however, there is a limit to their size, and they are exclusive, normally with the parties having to have a direct interest or stake in matter for which the grouping was formed.¹⁵ This is in fact often considered one of their key strengths, as it potentially offers much greater flexibility, adaptability, and focus to a minilateral initiative: fewer stakeholders means fewer sets of interests and in turn a lower likelihood of a critical clash of interests.

Likewise, the scope, procedural rigidity, and longevity of minilateral arrangements

11- Singh and Teo, “Introduction,” p. 3.

12- Tow, “Minilateral security’s relevance,” p. 235.

13- Naím, M. “Minilateralism,” *Foreign Policy*, 173 (July/August 2009), p. 137.

14- Tow, “Minilateral security’s relevance,” p. 235.

15- Teo, S. “Could Minilateralism Be Multilateralism’s Best Hope in the Asia Pacific?” *The Diplomat*, 15 December 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/could-minilateralism-be-multilateralisms-best-hope-in-the-asia-pacific/>; also Singh and Teo, “Introduction,” p. 4.

is not strictly defined, although they are not infinite and ultimately are either retired or transformed into more formal, multilateral arrangements. Although minilateral arrangements take diverse forms, they are established for specific, sometimes even ephemeral, purposes or issues,¹⁶ in contrast to multilateral arrangements, which are likely to have much grander, even universal goals at heart, and typically much longer term ones. As an “exercise in political signalling,” they are at the mercy of power structures that will change or freeze over time.¹⁷ Yet their informality is also a strength: compared to most multilateral institutions, they are less bureaucratic, more flexible in their meetings, less resource-intensive, and potentially able to discuss and negotiate more freely.¹⁸ These features make them appealing to participating states, as the entry costs into a minilateral arrangement are usually modest. Leaders may also feel that results are more likely to be obtained through minilateral arrangements, or that the initiative can be easily disbanded if it proves unachievable.

An argument can also be mounted that there are distinct approaches to minilateralism that can be identified, or even that subcategories of it are evident. Tow does this, drawing on Haass, to claim that five broad approaches exist.¹⁹ There are, he argues: “elite minilateralism,” such as when major or middle powers establish groupings within other groupings or bodies; “regional minilateralism,” where states work within trading arrangements; “functional minilateralism,” where states gather to address a very specific issue or threat; “informal minilateralism,” where states establish a shared interpretation or approach to an international issue; and “minilateral security,” particularly in cases where the US has adapted its alliance dynamics to create new informal security arrangements or dialogues. While not entirely convincing as a set of typologies—and not exactly the same as Haass’ subcategorization—such attempts at an ordering of the concept are nonetheless important reminders of the variety of spatial and temporal variations to be found in minilateralism, and of the differing motivations of the parties that engage in minilateral initiatives.

The varying recent examples of minilateralism is broadly consistent with the above. Both the remit and the profile of minilateral initiatives have varied greatly, but there has been a rapid rise in their occurrence since the 1970s and especially in the

16- Patrick, S. “The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?” *Global Summitry*, 1:2 (2015), p. 116.

17- Anuar, A. and Hussain, N. “Minilateralism for Multilateralism in the Post-Covid Age,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Policy Report*, Singapore, Nanyang Technological university, January 2021, p. 3.

18- *Ibid.*, p. 4.

19- Tow, “Minilateralism and US Security Policy,” p. 15. For several of these, Tow draws on Haass’ argument for “messy multilateralism” and the categories he creates around that concept: see Richard Haass, “The case for messy multilateralism,” *Financial Times*, 6 January 2010. <https://www.ft.com/content/18d8f8b6-fa2f-11de-beed-00144feab49a>.

twenty-first century.²⁰ The Group of Seven (G7), a collection of the world's major advanced economies, was formed in the 1970s,²¹ and informed later initiatives such as the Group of 20; indeed, the two have been rivals of sorts since the 2008 global financial crisis.²² Later cases grew more numerous, sometimes as stand-alone security or intelligence-sharing initiatives, sometimes as additional or sideline initiatives as part of a more structured multilateral arrangement; environmental initiatives are an example of the latter, where states have sometimes voluntarily agreed to supplementary action on climate change in situations where they have felt frustrated at the slow pace of more formal mechanisms.²³

In the security sphere, recent cases of minilateralism abound. A highly issue-specific and short-term arrangement was the multinational naval force assembled to counter Somali maritime piracy in the later 2000s, which brought together the US, some of its traditional allies, and a range of other parties including China, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, among others.²⁴ A potentially more important, longer term, and often-examined case more recently has been the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("the Quad"), involving the US, Japan, India, and Australia.²⁵ It met originally in 2007, was later disbanded after a change of prime minister in Japan and a change of policy on China in Australia, and was then resurrected in 2017, with renewed focus as a counter to a more aggressive Chinese posture towards East Asia. The Quad's clear focus on China, and its potential for expansion into a larger grouping, suggest that it may evolve into a more substantial body, perhaps even formalize as a multilateral institution. At present, however, one of its main attractions is its informality; a survey by the Washington-based think tank CSIS showed that elites within the party states see it as an important tool for discussion and coordination but at least for now are much more lukewarm on seeing it develop into a more formalized security body.²⁶

The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), involving China, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand, was established in 2016 to handle issues

20- Moret, E. "Effective minilateralism for the EU: What, when and how," *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Issues Brief 17*, Brussels, EUISS, 2016, p. 2.

21- Fioretos, O. "Minilateralism and informality in international monetary cooperation," *Review of International Political Economy*, 26:6 (2019), pp. 1136-1159; Moret, "Effective minilateralism for the EU," p. 2.

22- Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism'," pp. 120-121.

23- Ibid., pp. 121-122.

24- Ibid., p. 121.

25- Tow, W. T. "Minilateralism and US Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific: The legacy, viability and deficiencies of a new security approach," in Singh, B. and Teo, S. (eds), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, Routledge, 2020, pp. 18-20.

26- Buchan, P. G. and Rimland, B., "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Brief*, Washington, CSIS, March 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue>.

around the water resources of the Lacang and Mekong rivers, but it is much more ambitious than that, covering security, development, economic, and even some cultural dimensions, and above all represents an attempt by China to create a successful minilateral in the East and Southeast Asia region that will enhance both its image and influence.²⁷ It may also represent a Chinese attempt at countering groupings such as the Quad which are coalescing to counter some of Beijing's approaches, or it may be an attempt at undermining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which case it would represent an interesting example of a minilateral initiative being used to undermine or weaken a formal multilateral body. It is perhaps no surprise that the Quad, at their 2021 summit and ministerial meeting, avoided mentioning China by name but also reiterated their support for ASEAN as the central security body for Southeast Asia.²⁸

Other cases of minilateralism involve a small number of parties seeking specific negotiation processes and outcomes. North Korea's nuclear program and the security concerns on the Korean peninsula have prompted initiatives by the US and its allies, beginning in 1999 with a US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation and Oversight Group (TCOG), followed by the Six-Party Talks process, involving North Korea, China, the US, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, held in six rounds over 2003 to 2009. This represented a clear example of a small grouping that incorporated both the most affected parties and the most powerful major actors. While it has not met since 2009, when North Korea ended its participation, it has not been officially disestablished or concluded either, making it a flexible arrangement that could be revived at short notice if the interest and intent were in place among the parties.

Finally, an example involving the Middle East—one of the few, to date—was the grouping created for negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, including the eventual agreement in 2015 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, sometimes called “the Iran nuclear deal”). The negotiations began as a minilateral initiative by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the “EU-3”) to hold initial discussions with Iran and, once US engagement was secured, the talks were expanded to Iran and the so-called “P5+1”, in reference to the membership being the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany; thus, that is, France, the UK, Russia, China, the United States, and Germany.²⁹ The negotiations were arduous and lengthy; the initial EU-3 talks with Iran began in October 2003, and the JCPOA was signed on 14 July 2015. The Iran talks not only

27- Singh and Teo, “Introduction,” p. 8.

28- Heydarian, R. J. “Why Biden Should Pursue ‘Minilateralism; with ASEAN,” *CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Update*, 26 March 2021. <https://amti.csis.org/why-biden-should-pursue-mini-lateralism-with-asean/>.

29- Ishaque, W., Shah, S. J., and Ullah, A. “Iranian Nuclear Deal: Challenges for Regional and Global Strategic Management,” *Global Political Review*, 11:1 (2017), pp. 1-12.

demonstrate an example of minilateralism, but also show that a Middle Eastern state can be willing to engage with such frameworks, albeit one in this case that was backed up with the issue being escalated to the United Nations, the pressure of sanctions, and Iran's growing isolation and weakening economy in the first half of the 2010s.

Beyond this, there are scant examples of minilateralism in practice in the Middle East. An argument could be made that the nine-state coalition formed under Saudi leadership in March 2015 to intervene in the Yemeni civil war constituted a form of minilateral conduct; it was, after all, a specific initiative by a small set of parties that joined together not only to intervene in Yemen militarily in support of the government there but probably even more importantly in the minds of those states, it was serving to counter Iranian influence on the Arabian peninsula.³⁰ The Saudi-led coalition saw Iran as a re-emerging power at this time, and especially so after the signing of the JCPOA later in 2015.³¹ However, the fact that it was primarily a military intervention rather than a security process means that it is best considered an informal military alliance or arrangement rather than a minilateral diplomatic process. Somewhat similar was the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar over June 2017 to January 2021, which was also a multistate initiative, bringing together Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Egypt, and a range of smaller states to sever diplomatic ties, impose a blockade of Qatar's air and sea routes, and close the Saudi-Qatari land border.³² The "Qatar Crisis" reflected and, in many ways, solidified the relationships in the region. States joining the blockade tended to be those most reliant on Saudi Arabia, or most keen to build their ties with it, while Qatar expanded its ties with Turkey, Iran, and others as it sought new trade and diplomatic links to counter the effects of the blockade and the concomitant diplomatic pressure. Again, however, the Saudi-led blockade cannot be seen as minilateralism in the sense meant here, even if some elements of the crisis seemed to share some features with it. The crisis was a multi-state but Saudi-dominated attempt to rein in Qatar's regional conduct, and it stemmed predominantly from Saudi (and Emirati) competition with Qatar rather than from a desire by one or more partner states to construct an informal regional security framework. Nonetheless, the crisis offers insights into the rationale and prospects for minilateralism in the Gulf and the wider region in future (more on which shortly).

Yet the fact remains that there are few examples of minilateralism in the region.

30- Ulrichsen, K. C. "Introduction," in Ulrichsen, K. C. (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, Hurst, 2017, p. 16; Han, J., and Hakimian, H. "The Regional Security Complex in the Persian Gulf: The Contours of Iran's GCC Policy," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 13:4 (2019), pp. 502-503.

31- Han and Hakimian, "The Regional Security Complex," p. 504.

32- See Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, Hurst, 2020, especially pp. 67-100 on the blockade specifics.

This is perhaps why the scholarship on the region has largely ignored the concept as well. Minilateralism has become a much more salient feature of international relations elsewhere, especially among European Union states and in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions, than it has in the Middle East. On occasion, the United States has engaged with multiple partners on specific matters, or the US has been motivated by regional or subregional concerns in its specific bilateral relationships. Even then, however, these have not constituted substantive minilateral experiments. As a result, even when scholars have turned their attention to such dynamics, they have tended to be most interested in, for example, how and why a particular regional actor has chosen to link with the major power, rather than examining the dynamic at an international or subregional level. This is probably because of the specific and more local concerns that drive area studies and because of the challenges of marrying the specificities of the region to the methodologies and approaches of broader international relations theory.³³ Thus the field has seen a predominance of both foreign policy studies,³⁴ often with a policy bent,³⁵ and various realist and neorealist ones, which examine international relations in the region, but typically these are from the perspective of a single regional state, or a single state's relations with an external actor such as the US. There have been, of course, other works from other approaches such as constructivism and international sociology³⁶ which may provide some insights into the potential for minilateralism or the underlying factors that have inhibited it, but such works generally also have been silent on minilateralism.

To a lesser extent, works on Middle Eastern international relations have looked at dynamics at the regional or subregional level, which is perhaps not surprising given the insights that they potentially offer on the links between the Middle East, the Gulf, and the wider global security environment; the international and domestic dynamics and imperatives that shape and inform each other; and the capacity of multilateral arrangements to contribute to regional peace, security, and development.³⁷ Again, such works have disproportionately concentrated on states' particular interests and ambitions or on foreign policy making processes, rather than on constructivist ideas or other processes by which interests and security are

33- Gray, M. "Emerging Trends and Debates in Gulf Studies," in Quenzer, K., Syed, M., and Yarbakhsh, E. (eds), *Emerging Scholarship on the Middle East and Central Asia: Moving from the Periphery*, Lexington, 2018, pp. 4-7, 10-12.

34- See Fred H. Lawson, "From Here We Begin: A Survey of Scholarship on the International Relations of the Gulf," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:3 (2009), pp. 338-345.

35- Halliday, F. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, especially pp. 25-30.

36- The best known, arguably, being Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, Columbia University Press, 1998.

37- Fawcett, L. "Alliances, Cooperation, and Regionalism in the Middle East," in Fawcett, L. (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 189.

interpreted and constituted.³⁸ Nonetheless, there are a range of works on alliances, regionalism, and the dynamics of relationships among multiple states, as indeed there ought to be, given both the potential for multilateral cooperation in the region and the forces undermining it, and thus the relative underdevelopment of regional security architecture in the region, including in the Gulf, compared to other parts of the world.³⁹ Again, however, they have focused either on the region's or a subregion's relations with external actors and forces, or on the region's (rather limited and unimpressive) attempts at formal multilateralism, rather than minilateralism.

Current issues with Gulf stability and security architecture.

The security environment in the Middle East, and not least of all in the Gulf subregion, is volatile and largely unstructured. The Gulf subregion is, as Kamrava notes, “one of the most heavily armed, securitized, and highly volatile regions of the world,”⁴⁰ despite the tremendous injection of oil wealth into the subregion's economies for some seven decades—or perhaps, as some would argue, partly because of this, with oil increasing external powers' interest in the subregion, dominating leaders' security interests and postures,⁴¹ and creating rentier effects on its state-society relations.⁴² Additionally, attempts by states to engage with an external patron or to construct security architecture and processes have, in both cases, mostly failed to improve the subregional security setting and its prospects for stability. Thus it is that the Gulf faces an immense and often unique set of security challenges—some originating within the subregion and others with broader sources—and yet is then poorly equipped to respond to these challenges effectively and in a way that will ensure security and stability. Several reasons account for this: the confluence of domestic and international political imperatives on leaders that are struggling with nation-building and legitimization; poor security architecture to deal with issues as they arise; and a lack of consensus or compromise on the roles external actors should play.

The first of these—the interactions of internal and external variables in forming strategic cultures and shaping foreign policy making—are a reminder that

38- Lawson, “From Here We Begin,” p. 345.

39- Fawcett, “Alliances, Cooperation, and Regionalism in the Middle East,” pp. 204-206.

40- Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*, p. 10.

41- See, as examples and among many, F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; and Mary Ann Tétreault, “La Longue Durée and Energy Security in the Gulf,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:3 (2009), pp. 375-393.

42- See, as an example of an early work on rentier state theory, Giacomo Luciani, “Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework,” in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, Routledge, 1990, pp. 65-84; and for a later piece that includes a survey of the subsequent literature, Matthew Gray, “A Theory of ‘Late Rentierism’ in the Arab States of the Gulf,” *Center for International and Regional Studies Occasional Paper No. 7*, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, 2011.

decision-making is rarely the preserve of a ruler alone. Important as kings and presidents are in the region, a range of other actors also act on the leader and shape foreign policy decisions, with the structures of these systems playing an additional role in establishing the scope and limits of what is possible or in setting security and diplomatic priorities. Most obviously, rulers are constrained by bureaucratic structures and interests. Even though rulers seek to manage state institutions through patron-client networks and other personalized means, this does not give them absolute control. Bureaucratic elites will have their own interests, and oftentimes their own resources and networks, through which to pursue their policy outcomes.⁴³ It is, after all, through such mechanisms that the state's allocative capacity is managed, and thus the ability of the ruler to use oil wealth to ensure popular acquiescence is, to a considerable degree, in the hands of bureaucrats; likewise, the specific form of state capitalism that characterizes the contemporary subregion also relies upon a set of officials and state capitalists who are both loyal and capable.⁴⁴

At the broader societal level, even autocratic leaders have to contend with popular opinion, as no leadership is immune from the risks of unrest, and all would prefer to seek agreement, or at least acquiescence, from their populations rather than resorting to coercion. At the very least, "it does set limits beyond which the ruler cannot go," something attested to by the history of popular mobilizations in the region because leaders are aware of popular sentiment on particular international issues and, when possible, will seek to respond to it.⁴⁵ Populations always have a degree of agency, even if in the case of the Gulf it is constrained by rentierism and the state's potential coercive capacity. Still, leaders ignore it at their peril.⁴⁶ Rentierism is a tool for the more effective control of society and thus for regime durability. It permits the state resources with which to buy popular acceptance, allay demands for political accountability and democratization, and fund coercive institutions, but it does not guarantee their survival.⁴⁷

All this means that the Gulf's leaders make foreign policy decisions with domestic imperatives regularly at the forefront of their minds. Poor legitimacy, sectarianism, Islamism, and other issues must be dealt with, on top of the need for legitimacy-building and to ensure both popular acquiescence and elite solidarity. This keeps domestic factors and imperatives deeply integrated with foreign and security policies across the subregion. This is an idea long recognized in foreign policy

43- Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, pp. 55-56.

44- Gray, M. "Rentierism's Siblings: On the Linkages between Rents, Neopatrimonialism, and Entrepreneurial State Capitalism in the Persian Gulf Monarchies," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:Suppl.1 (2018), pp. 29-45.

45- Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, pp. 56-59.

46- Gray, A Theory of 'Late Rentierism', pp. 23-25.

47- *Ibid.*, especially pp. 18-22.

analysis and especially in the (rather limited) work on omnibalancing, which argues that leaders often ally with a major power, in combination with more repressive or politically divisive tactics domestically, to ensure their survival.⁴⁸ Arguably, such regime survival strategies have worked to date, if assessed by the durability of the Gulf monarchies compared to the removal of the Iraqi one in 1958 and the Iranian in 1979.⁴⁹ The Gulf monarchies have also collaborated in their security when the need has arisen, and with domestic considerations in mind. The 2011 Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain to help the Al Khalifa regime suppress popular protests and protect strategic sites was prompted by the threat posed by Shia unrest, a fear of Iranian involvement on the Arab side of the Gulf, and even the possibility at the time that the Bahraini ruling family could be overthrown by the country's majority Shia population.⁵⁰ The Al Khalifa ruling elite had not only allowed Shia resentments to simmer, but also failed to maintain elite solidarity and keep many of the Sunni minority population happy⁵¹—a reminder of the risks faced by regimes if they ignore popular frustrations or fail to adequately build their legitimacy, even if they possess considerable repressive and cooptive capability.

The Saudis were fearful of the unrest spreading to their own minority Shia population, but the Arab Spring protests were a threat to the Gulf leaderships for reasons beyond sectarianism. Equally important—or perhaps even more so—was the general fear that the unrest triggered in the minds of rulers who had presumed that the rentier-based ruling bargain would be sufficient to ensure their tenure. In many cases, rentier tactics had indeed worked, or at least contributed, to more stable state-society relations, but the unrest in Bahrain, and the Shia protests in Saudi Arabia and smaller urban unrest in parts of Oman and in Kuwait, also demonstrated that, while financial cooptative capacity is important and kept the Gulf's streets much quieter than elsewhere in the region during the 2010-11 uprisings, leaders still have to be wary of, and address, dissatisfaction among some social groups and towards specific issues, especially if they do not want to substantially amend the ruling bargain of the past.⁵²

Likewise, ruling families and elites are concerned, albeit to varying degrees, about

48- See for example Hillel Frisch, "Why monarchies persist: balancing between internal and external vulnerability," *Review of International Studies*, 37:1 (2011), pp. 167-184.

49- Ulrichsen, K. C. *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, Hurst, 2011, pp. 37-38.

50- Matthiesen, T. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't*, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 18-27.

51- For some context on this issue, and an argument along similar lines to here, see Kristin Smith Diwan, "Royal Factions, Ruling Strategies, and Sectarianism in Bahrain," in Lawrence Potter (ed.), *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, Hurst, 2013, pp. 143-177.

52- Lucas, R. E. "The Persian Gulf Monarchies and the Arab Spring," in Kamrava. M. (ed.), *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, Hurst, 2014, pp. 339-340.

the risks of Islamist extremism.⁵³ The Saudi government in particular faced a sustained threat from Al-Qa'eda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), due partly to anger among some Saudis and others about the US presence in the Kingdom in the 1990s and then the US-led 2003 Iraq war and the conflict there after the removal of Saddam's regime, and in part because of weak security capabilities in neighbouring Yemen. The Saudis made a concerted effort to counter extremism after a triple car-bombing attack in Riyadh in May 2003 by AQAP, which set off a multi-year fight between the Saudi state and AQAP. It was the most substantial internal conflict in the Kingdom in modern times.⁵⁴ Around the same time, the post-2003 turmoil in Iraq added to security concerns across the Gulf monarchies, as many Gulf nationals travelled to Iraq to join extremist groups there. Later, a reconstitution of AQAP in 2009, and then the rise and fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shams (ISIS) in the 2010s, added further to the risks of radicalization among Gulf populations and of extremism spreading into various Gulf states.⁵⁵ The strategy of ISIS to paint Gulf regimes as both un-Islamic and as "a conduit for corrosive western influence and dominance over the Muslim world" risked undermining the legitimacy of Gulf regimes and radicalizing some among their populations.⁵⁶ For a time, it seemed to bring the Gulf leaderships closer together, at least until the Qatar crisis began in June 2017, but regardless it served to remind these leaderships of the links between regional security issues and domestic politics and of how quickly the security environment could change.

This all noted, there are severe constraints on the ability of Gulf rulers and elites to collaborate effectively towards improving or even stabilizing subregional security. The Middle East as a whole has had an unfortunate set of experiences in modern times with attempts at creating security architecture and processes. Arab leaders have made several attempts at promoting Arab unity, through the Arab League and also by subregional or specific attempts at collective security and cooperation. These have fared poorly, however, due to structural impediments such as the vast gaps in wealth between states, political differences over Arabism and radical-conservative divisions among leaderships, and disagreements over specific policies and priorities.⁵⁷ With these barriers comes further evidence, if any more were needed, of how domestic political imperatives typically trump incentives for enhanced external security cooperation.

53- Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf*, especially pp. 49-58.

54- Hegghammer, *T. Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 1.

55- Younis, N. "The Rise of ISIS: Iraq and Persian Gulf Security," in Ulrichsen, K.C. (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, Hurst, 2017, pp. 114-119.

56- *Ibid.*, p. 115.

57- See Fawcett, "Alliances, Cooperation, and Regionalism," pp. 196-200; and Hudson, M. C. "Arab Integration: An Overview," in Hudson, M. C. (ed.) *Middle East Dilemma: The Politics and Economics of Arab Integration*, I. B. Tauris, 1999, pp. 8-19.

The Gulf has fared better, but only somewhat and only in certain respects. As with the Arab world more widely, one might expect to find cultural, linguistic, and other similarities drawing the Arab states of the subregion towards each other, and to a degree this has been the case. There is a case to be made that shared social bonds and cultural characteristics do cross some state boundaries, and some scholars have talked about there being a specific Gulf, or *khaliji*, identity.⁵⁸ The concept is useful in delineating an identity that is more specific than the wider, declining Arabism that received so much attention in the mid- and late-twentieth century,⁵⁹ but whether it can be translated into a state-centred security approach is much more debatable. The evidence in recent years, as splits have become evident among the Gulf monarchies, suggests not.

Yet, the experiment in forming and expanding the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nonetheless represents the best success that the Arab world has had in building (subregional) security architecture and a framework for economic cooperation. The GCC's founding in 1981, soon after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, was a response to the security fears of the time. Moreover, with six conservative Sunni Gulf monarchies as members, the organization shared regime types and, notwithstanding differences in size, similar economic profiles and capacities. This perhaps accounts for its endurance since its foundation, in contrast with other blocs and arrangements that either failed, as with the short-lived Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) between Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and the Yemen Arab Republic, or stagnated.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the GCC has also had something of an identity crisis for much of its four-decade-long life, at times seemingly intended as a security bloc, at other times an economic cooperation body, and to some (also) a grouping concerned primarily with legitimacy-building and regime consolidation by the leaders of its member-states.⁶¹ It has made considerable strides in the trade and economic sphere—developing a common market among the member-states and undertaking other initiatives in trade, finance, and innovation—although given its age, even in this respect arguably it has been less successful than might be expected.⁶² In the military and security spheres it has

58- See for example William O. Beeman, "Gulf Society: An Anthropological View of the *Khalijis*—Their Evolution and way of Life," in Lawrence G. Potter (ed.), *The Persian Gulf in History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 147-159; and Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf: Diplomacy, Security and Economic Coordination in a Changing Middle East*, I. B. Tauris, 2011, pp. 50-51, 54.

59- Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, p. 50.

60- Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, p. 282.

61- See for example Leonie Holthaus, "Long Live the Neo-traditional Kings? The Gulf Cooperation Council and Legitimation of Monarchical Rule in the Arabian Peninsula," *Middle East Critique*, 28:4 (2019), pp. 381-382; and Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*, pp. 79-88.

62- Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, pp. 57-72; Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), "The Gulf in the new world order: a forgotten emerging power?" *Working Paper 101*, FRIDE, 2010.

been far less successful,⁶³ with joint exercises taking place, but only a small rapid deployment force in place which is mostly symbolic in nature.⁶⁴ The GCC's only real military intervention was, as already noted, that in Bahrain in 2011.⁶⁵

There are strong factors acting against the GCC developing into more than it is currently. Saudi Arabia's size has seen it seek to dominate the Council at times, yet other states such as the UAE and Qatar have seen their global role increase markedly in the last couple of decades, while economic similarities across the six oil-focused states limits the prospects for them to become truly economically integrated and to complement each other's economies. Moreover, if the intention is for the GCC to serve as a security body that will stabilize the subregion as a whole, then it cannot do so while excluding Iran and Iraq; these are, along with Saudi Arabia, two of the Gulf's three main powers. Yet the prospects of a subregional-wide, inclusive security apparatus are even more distant than ever, especially given the marked increase in Saudi-Iranian rivalry and competition, especially since 2003, but also on top of the territorial and other disputes between Iran and GCC member-states.⁶⁶

The limitations of a multilateral body such as the GCC in the subregion is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the failings and divisions that have occurred among its member-states. There have long been differences in the security perceptions of the GCC states' regimes; by the time the Iran-Iraq war had ended, their views on oil prices had begun to diverge, then in the 1990s their views on, and relations with, Iran began also to differ.⁶⁷ Member-states had border disputes, such as that between Saudi Arabia and Qatar—which saw border clashes in 1992—and the Hawar Islands dispute between Qatar and Bahrain, which ran through the 1980s and 1990s and was only resolved by an International Court of Justice ruling in 2001.⁶⁸ There were other divisions later, especially foreign policy and security ones stemming from the varying Gulf states' positions towards the 2003 Iraq War and then from the altered security environment after it.⁶⁹

Most dramatic of all their divisions was the 2017-21 Qatar Crisis, which illustrated

63- Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, pp. 76-79.

64- *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

65- Pinfari, M. "Regional Organizations in the Middle East," *Oxford Handbooks Online*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 14. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935307-e-86>.

66- Kumar, P. R. "A Comprehensive Security Regime in the Gulf Region: Prospects and Challenges," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 13:4 (2019), pp. 484-488.

67- Karawan, I. A. "The Erosion of Consensus: Perceptions of GCC States of a Changing Region," in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick (eds.), *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus*, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 91-107.

68- Gray, M. *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development*, Rienner, L. 2013, pp. 45, 187-188.

69- Yaphe, J. S. "Iraq and its Gulf Arab Neighbors: Avoiding Risk, Seeking Opportunity," in Barkey, H. J., Lasensky, S. B., and Marr, P. (eds.), *Iraq, Its Neighbors, and the United States: Competition, Crisis, and the Reordering of Power*, United States Institute of Peace, 2011, pp. 125-135.

just how substantial the regional policy differences and rivalries among the GCC states had become, following the 2010-11 Arab uprisings and the new conflicts and regional security problems of the 2010s. The Crisis actually predated 2017: Qatar had become more activist in its foreign policy starting in the early 2000s, and several states, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, subsequently became frustrated over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt over 2011-13, its relatively good relations with Iran, and the critical regional reporting by the Qatari-based news channel Al-Jazeera.⁷⁰ They withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in March 2014, sparking a crisis that only ended late in the year after Qatar agreed to cease support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups, and to adopt a policy of regional non-interference⁷¹ (likely code for reining in Al-Jazeera).

The 2017-21 crisis was similar in its causes and the underlying grievances and rivalries among the actors. It began on 5 June 2017 with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain cutting ties with Qatar, expelling its citizens, withdrawing their own, and closing their airspace to Qatari aircraft. Saudi Arabia also closed its land border with Qatar—Qatar's only land border—and Egypt and other states also cut off diplomatic ties.⁷² On 22 June, the main Gulf protagonists presented Qatar with a list of some 13 demands, covering reduced relations with Iran, an end to support for Islamist groups in the region, the closure of Al-Jazeera, an end to Qatari-Turkish military cooperation, an end to what they claimed was Qatari interference in other GCC states' internal affairs, and the payment of reparations.⁷³ These are demands to which Qatar could never concede, of course, and so the crisis became a sustained one, with both sides holding strong and largely-fixed positions. Its end, or more precisely its "formal beginning of the end,"⁷⁴ came only with a mediated statement of rapprochement in January 2021, and with the core issues that caused it largely remaining unresolved.⁷⁵

Both the 2014 and 2017-21 crises highlighted some of the starkest and most serious shortcomings of the GCC as a collective and subregional security body: its lack of structure and clear formalized security processes. The GCC technically has conflict resolution mechanisms built into its structure, in its Charter and in

70- For further context and discussion see Cinzia Bianco and Gareth Stansfield, "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011," *International Affairs*, 94:3 (2018), pp. 613-635.

71- Katzman, K. "Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service Report R44533*, United States Congressional Research Service, updated 27 August 2021, p. 8; and Vakil, S. "Qatar crisis: A beginning to the end?" *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 8 January 2021, n.p. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/01/qatar-crisis-beginning-end>.

72- For more details on the 2017-21 Qatar Crisis see Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*, pp. 79-100.

73- The list is reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

74- Vakil, "Qatar crisis," n.p.

75- Ramani, S. "The Qatar Blockade Is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On," *Foreign Policy* website, 27 January 2021, n.p. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>.

later rules on economic and commercial arbitration but has not formalized these.⁷⁶ Crucially, it has not created any judicial process for conflict resolution, meaning there is no enforcement mechanisms to ensure the implementation of decisions. Even its dialogue processes are less formal than most similar organizations. This is a deliberate act, reflecting both a preference for diplomatic dialogue over legal frameworks, and likely also because of the reluctance of leaders to surrender real authority to a supranational organ. Even with the cultural similarities across its member-states, its relatively alike regimes, and a set of shared security concerns—if also plenty of differences—it is largely ineffectual, including in roles such as internal dispute resolution, where potentially it could be most valuable. Its successes in the security sphere predominantly came in its earlier years and through ministerial-level decisions⁷⁷ rather than from lower levels and within the organization, limiting its scope for action on more serious or divisive issues. Indeed, it is marked by Saudi attempts at leadership, pushback against this from the UAE and especially Qatar, and among all its members, an attempt to utilize the body primarily for regime consolidation and other domestic political purposes.

The extant security architecture in the Gulf has two key features that create a competitive, penetrated, and securitized subregion. The first is the circular dynamic of the Gulf as a “regional security complex,”⁷⁸ wherein the lack of effective security architecture reduces the confidence of subregional actors, both large and small, that they can improve security through discourse or conflict resolution methods, which changes their behaviour and inclines them towards a more activist and assertive approach to the Gulf and the wider region, which in turn exacerbates tensions with other states, undermines their confidence in the subregional order, and so weakens the prospects for building better security architecture and processes.⁷⁹

Second, the subregional status quo is hampered by the geopolitical reality of there being a combination of three very different subregional powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq) and five much smaller states. With two of the three major actors outside of the GCC and not in any other security bloc or process that might resolve conflicts or build confidence, all three are incentivized to plan for their own defence against the others and preferably to build a qualitative or quantitative edge over them. This not only further dampens trust between them, but has the opposite effect, and by eroding trust and the foundations needed for effective subregionalism encourages

76- Altamimi, A. M. “An Appraisal of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s Mechanisms for Co-operation and the Settlement of Disputes,” *Asian Journal of International Law*, 10:2 (2020), pp. 321-345.

77- Ibid., pp. 325-326.

78- Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, pp. 2-6.

79- Lawson, F. H. “Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf,” in Kamrava, M. (ed.) *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse University Press, 2011, pp. 51-56.

an arms race.⁸⁰ This has seen Saudi Arabia, for example, maintain and at times encourage its relationship with the United States, in pursuit of greater assurances for its security, but in so doing, this has at times had the effect of exacerbating tensions in the neighbourhood.

For the smaller Gulf states, meanwhile, there is an even greater perceived threat from the relative strength of the larger actors. These concerns focus on Iran or Iraq, depending on the circumstances, and on anxiety about Saudi dominance on the Arabian peninsula, the latter of which has driven the smaller states into the GCC but as self-interested members with only a limited willingness to use the body for broad, subregional security processes. The same concerns have encouraged them to seek a security arrangement with Washington, which they have a long-term record of doing,⁸¹ sometimes acting unilaterally and in a way that undermines the prospects of using a body such as the GCC.⁸² It is likely that the more activist turn in small state foreign policies, beginning with Qatar in the early 2000s and followed by the UAE after the Arab uprisings, was also a product of this dynamic. In particular, activism has had an underlying aim of broadening foreign policy into the economic realm, increasing the range of other states with an interest in the incumbent regime and system, thereby constituting the use of wealth to conduct more ambitious foreign and economic policies in pursuit of, simultaneously, more international leverage and still greater wealth. This is a key dynamic that has linked late rentierism, entrepreneurial state capitalism, and economic statecraft by several Gulf states in recent years.⁸³

Thus, the potential for resolving conflicts is substantially reduced, new initiatives go unexplored because of mistrust or rivalry, and what specific policies or ideas are explored have far less chance of success. For all the money spent by Gulf states on defence, they are no more secure than in the past and perhaps even more vulnerable.⁸⁴ Yet both the wider regional setting and the global setting are changing and becoming less predictable. The Biden Administration has signalled a desire to shift US focus, and at least some military assets, from the Middle East to East Asia, something originally envisaged by the Obama Administration (2009-17) but now looking increasingly likely, especially as the role of new groupings such as

80- On some of the dynamics that form this problem, see Kamrava, *Troubled Waters*, pp. 59-64, 72-100 passim.

81- Goldfischer, D. "The United States and its key Gulf allies: a new foundation for a troubled partnership?" in Almezaini, K. S., and Rickli, J.(eds), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and security policies before and after the Arab Spring*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 64-88.

82- Lawson, "Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf," pp. 60-61.

83- For more detail on this argument see Matthew Gray, "Qatar: Leadership transition, regional crisis, and the imperatives for reform," in Martin Beck and Thomas Richter (eds), *Oil and the political economy in the Middle East: Post-2014 adjustment policies of the Arab Gulf and beyond*, Manchester University Press, 2021, pp. 107-109.

84- Lawson, "Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf," p. 54.

the Quad has increased, and the new AUKUS security arrangement announced, in 2021. Washington’s allies have begun to see a reliance on the US as less secure than in the past, something reinforced by the rapid departure of American forces from Afghanistan and the fall of the government there to the Taliban in August 2021. These are recent events, but they are occurring in a period marked by a sustained rise in Chinese economic and military power and an increasingly assertive stance by Beijing. In other parts of the world, new partnerships are being constructed and new security frameworks negotiated—including informal, flexible minilateral ones, seemingly well-suited to the new dynamics of global power—but in the Gulf the security structure and process seems to have changed little.

Is minilateralism a solution to Gulf security?

If multilateralism has a very poor record in the Gulf (not to mention in the wider Middle East), and if bilateralism has limitations in terms of its utility and given the divisions it may cause where major powers are involved, is minilateralism a possible alternative or supplement to these? Specifically, what prospects does it contain, and what risks and limitations?

There is considerable potential for minilateralism to be adopted in at least some circumstances, especially if it were done appropriately and, in some cases, in conjunction with existing bilateral or multilateral processes. To a very limited extent, there are already examples of informal cooperation or of minilateral-style processes involving actors in the region, as already discussed, but with the current limitations and weaknesses of existing security architecture and processes, there is scope for considerably more. The JCPOA is one example, albeit one driven by external actors and only involving one Gulf state, Iran. Less noticeably, perhaps, a good part of “the diplomatic activity that is often referred to the GCC as an institution has been, in fact, implemented by member states—typically Saudi Arabia and Qatar—under the informal clout of the GCC.”⁸⁵ This suggests that minilateralism contains considerable potential, even if (or perhaps most often when) it carries the imprimatur of a multilateral body or institution, even one that otherwise has struggled to achieve the aspirations set for it. And finally, as also already noted, the examples from other parts of the world, especially Europe and the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific regions, demonstrate what might be accomplished with a greater focus on such approaches.

In the first instance, economics may be where the most potential lies, as the rivalries between the GCC members is lesser in the economic realm than in the diplomatic

85- Pinfari, M. “Nothing but Failure? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts,” *Working Paper no. 45*, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics, March 2009, p. 17. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/cscc-working-papers-phase-two/wp45.2-nothing-but-failure.pdf>.

and strategic. Minilateral approaches by some member states to economic ties with states outside of the GCC may be one area, as Gulf investments have grown in the wider region and given the scope for further expansion of both trade and investment with some Arab states. This is important also because the economic similarities across the GCC mean that there is limited scope for exploiting complementarities between them.⁸⁶ Areas where differences have previously precluded progress, such as in the GCC's past goal to establish a single currency, could be another area where a minilateral approach might be useful. The GCC originally proposed a monetary union early this century, but the delay by Oman in 2006 and the UAE withdrawal in 2009, along with the crisis in the Eurozone countries in 2008-09 and after, virtually halted the initiative.⁸⁷ Still, the remaining GCC member states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—have kept it as an ambition, there have been bilateral moves that would assist it, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE have begun examining the idea of a common digital currency.⁸⁸ Such steps, including coordination of fiscal and monetary policies, or other moves laying the groundwork for monetary union, could be undertaken selectively among states, including those beyond the GCC, through minilateral mechanisms. Moreover, the similarities across the GCC economies means there are in fact some good arguments to be made for trying to bring other Middle Eastern economies into the process, and especially into more limited or specialized activities such as a common digital currency. Indeed, informal mechanisms seem to be the limit of what is possible at present within the GCC structure, given both the fiscal and monetary policy variances among member states and the rivalries between them.

In the diplomatic and security spheres, Pinfari's point, noted above, about the initiatives that occur below the GCC but with its endorsement, is an important one. This is perhaps the easiest starting point for greater minilateralism by the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, already member states of the GCC and already accustomed to operating within it. The strains on the GCC created by the 2017-21 Qatar Crisis remain a limitation on its potential, even if it continues to operate at lower levels with some functionality, and so a greater use of specific minilateral processes would serve several purposes. They would potentially allow progress by a subset of GCC member states in particular spheres, especially if the focus were on specific issues, the actors involved shared their interests or ambitions, and of course provided they avoided their activities clashing with wider GCC principles or goals. A subset of GCC states might, for example, move forward

86- FRIDE, "The Gulf in the new world order," p. 11.

87- For a comprehensive background on GCC monetary union, and a prognosis on its future, see Emilie J. Rutledge, *Monetary Union in the Gulf: Prospects for a Single Currency in the Arabian Peninsula*, Routledge, 2009.

88- Thompson, R. "Common needs, diverging agendas: The GCC at 40," *Middle East Economic Digest (MEED)*, 25 May 2021, n.p. <https://www.meed.com/gcc-40-year-anniversary>.

on specific economic initiatives, and then if these were successful, expand them out to the GCC more widely. There is already some precedent for such activity; several Gulf states have provided economic assistance to Bahrain, for example, providing a US\$10 billion aid package in 2018 to help Manama with financing while it undertook fiscal reforms, and in the same year providing a similar US\$2.5 billion package to Jordan.⁸⁹ Such aid represents a form of economic minilateralism, with the three GCC states operating outside of the GCC framework and, at the time, with intra-GCC dynamics, especially the Qatar Crisis, arguably shaping the decision but certainly determining the informal, minilateral nature of it.

Where disagreements exist that prohibit a GCC-wide initiative on a particular issue, a group of states could form their own minilateral grouping to pursue a specific goal; something that is especially appealing if contrasted with the financial and reputational costs of a major fracture such as the Qatar Crisis.⁹⁰ There is considerable scope for such tactics in areas such as trade, investment promotion, innovation and entrepreneurialism, among others. In the security sphere, the fact that the GCC states have differing views on specific Middle Eastern issues means that such an approach would potentially work in, say, allowing some of the GCC states to engage with one area of the region where they have a particular interest, while allowing others to opt out of that particular process without it undermining the GCC as an institution or the cohesion of its members.

Likewise, minilateralism would offer the GCC, or a subset of it, greater flexibility in engaging actors outside the region. Bringing new member states into the body has been widely discussed, almost from the body's inception but especially since just after the 2010-11 Arab uprisings, when Jordan and Morocco were suggested as future members and steps begun to bring Jordan in particular into it.⁹¹ The GCC states share land borders with three non-member states (Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen), are close by sea to several others, and have economic or security ties to a range of regional states. A minilateral approach may suit certain states in building their ties with specific non-member states without, in the first instance, feeling it necessary to do so through the GCC. The links between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt,

89- Mogielnicki, R. "The politics of aid: GCC support for Bahrain," *Middle East Institute*, 30 October 2018, n.p. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/politics-aid-gcc-support-bahrain>.

90- Kabbani, N. and Mimoune, N. B. "Economic Diversification in the Gulf: Time to Redouble Efforts," *Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing*, Brookings Institution/Brookings Doha Center, January 2021, pp. 9-10.

91- Hamdan, S. "Gulf Council Reaches Out to Morocco and Jordan," *The New York Times*, 25 May 2011, n.p. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/middleeast/26iht-M26-GCC.html>.

for example, have grown stronger in recent years,⁹² and although these three states were among the key group that confronted Qatar and triggered the Qatar crisis in June 2017, there is nonetheless some scope for them to deepen their ties and their activities, especially in areas outside of the Gulf, without it necessarily damaging the GCC. In fact, minilateralism may be the ideal approach to solidifying this tripartite relationship, given its informality and understated nature; a more ambitious step, such as moves towards bringing Egypt into the GCC as a member state, would likely fail and, at present, cause unnecessary rifts among existing members.

Somewhat similarly, minilateralism could serve as a process for confidence-building, initially structured as something specific and informal but ultimately working towards a fuller GCC step or policy. Again, the question of GCC membership provides potential examples of how this might be done. This has already started in a certain respect with Jordan, which shares a monarchical system with the GCC states and which is also embedded economically with the Gulf, heavily reliant on aid and trade with the GCC. military links.⁹³ It is particularly close to Saudi Arabia, but has also managed to maintain its ties with other GCC states, including Qatar after the outbreak of the Qatar Crisis. Conversely, for the Gulf states, Jordan possesses considerable potential as a military and security partner, given the size and capability of its armed forces and its geographical location between the Gulf and the Levant.⁹⁴ There are also shared interests in issues such as countering Sunni extremism and on the Israeli-Palestinian issue,⁹⁵ even if the latter also provides the risk for differences, too.

There is the potential for engagement in some of these spheres with other states, too, for example with Iraq on trade and investment or on anti-extremism initiatives and given Iraq's need for new economic opportunities and investment. As noted by Alaaldin: "Iraq's single most important path to recovery may come in the form of closer ties to the Arab Gulf states. To date, Gulf monarchies have not invested significant energy and resources in Iraq.... With U.S. support and leadership, Iraq can become re-integrated into the Arab world, re-invigorate a relationship with the

92- Aftandilian, G. "Egyptian-Saudi Relations: Strategic Ties with Some Political Strains", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 9 February 2021, n.p. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egyptian-saudi-relations-strategic-ties-with-some-political-strains/>. For more context on the relationship, see David Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals," *Chatham House Research Paper*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, April 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/egypt-and-gulf>.

93- Aftandilian, G. "Jordan Maneuvers in GCC Politics to Protect Its Interests", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 27 May 2020, n.p. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/jordan-maneuvers-in-gcc-politics-to-protect-its-interests/>.

94- Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "GCC seeks military alliance with Jordan and Morocco," *EIU Saudi Arabia*, 18 April 2014, n.p. <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=81741392&Country=Saudi%20Arabia&topic=Politics&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=International+relations&u=1&pid=382925822&oid=382925822&uid=1>.

95- "Jordan's King Abdullah, GCC chief hold talks on anti-Arab extremist violence in Jerusalem," *Arab News*, 26 April 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1849401/middle-east>.

Gulf that is based on mutual interests to help revive the Iraqi economy, and reduce its dependence on Iran in the process.”⁹⁶ Alaaldin’s arguments demonstrate in effect that this is a situation where minilateralism could potentially work with bilateralism and multilateralism: specific GCC member states could begin by deepening their informal links and expanding their ties with Iraq, but also with backing from the United States, in effect therefore bringing in a set of bilateral US-Gulf relations as well. In due course, if such initiatives were expanded to the GCC in a more formal way, this could constitute minilateralism, backed by bilateralism, feeding into a multilateral structure and process. At some early stage, however, the GCC will have to “no longer [view Iraq] predominantly through the prism of its own domestic security considerations vis-à-vis Shiite communities in the Gulf” and Iraq will need to adopt a foreign policy more independent of Iran.⁹⁷ At present, these are not small challenges for either side, but perhaps a set of minilateral initiatives, focused on what is possible at the time and in specific circumstances, is the best point of departure.

Yet there are incentives to engage with Iran in the economic and trade sphere, especially if the JCPOA is resurrected or another similar deal struck in its place. Qatar has faced the imperative of having to have a working relationship with Tehran, since the two countries share the gas field known in Qatar and Iran respectively as the North Dome and South Pars. Doha has also sought to engage with major regional actors such as Iran as a way to ensure that such states have an interest in stability and are tempted by the prospect of further economic initiatives in the future.⁹⁸ Oman has also followed a somewhat similar strategy, albeit in combination with more of a mediator role than Qatar has claimed, but with the same goals of pursuing economic opportunity in tandem with national security and regime consolidation.⁹⁹ It is conceivable that states such as these, perhaps with others from the wider Middle East, could use a minilateral process to begin building ties with Iran, and if successful, in due course the GCC could then provide a structure that might multilateralize the arrangement, although this would be a lengthy process given the rivalries and mistrust shared by Iran and key GCC state such as Saudi Arabia.

Importantly, minilateralism seems especially well suited to the GCC states’ propensity to embed foreign policy and security priorities in domestic political

96- Alaaldin, R. “Iraq’s best hope is developing stronger ties to the Gulf — with US help,” *Brookings* blog, 19 August 2020, n.p. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/19/iraqs-best-hope-is-developing-stronger-ties-to-the-gulf-with-us-help/>.

97- *Ibid.*, n.p.

98- Gray, *Qatar*, pp. 94, 99, 198-200.

99- See Abdullah Baabood, “Oman’s independent foreign policy,” in Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and security policies before and after the Arab Spring*, Routledge, 2017, especially pp. 111-118.

concerns and objectives. The modest progress made thus far by the GCC in its over forty-year lifespan both informs this strategy and is a symptom of it. However, it may also serve as a prompt to leaders—at least on matters where they are genuinely interested in achieving substantial progress in their foreign relations—to look at other approaches. It is both a strength and a weakness that the GCC (and other such formalized bodies) is often used by rulers as a mechanism for self-promotion and legitimization at home.¹⁰⁰ It is a factor that has hobbled and constrained the GCC. Minilateral initiatives, in contrast, are less prone to this tactic. They are informal and lower profile, and often established towards simpler and specific outcomes, making it more difficult for flaws and failures to be hidden in longer-term processes and vague ambitions. Conversely, in cases where a leader wishes to act but is constrained by domestic actors, there is likely to be more scope for action using a minilateral forum or process than in attempting something more ambitious using established security architecture that may also have pre-existing problems or power dynamics. Therefore, rather than seek to either fundamentally reform the GCC or alternatively to bypass it completely, perhaps a more sceptical yet effective approach to some issues might be to utilize minilateral initiatives as an *additional* process, separate to the GCC unless and until there is unanimity among its members on the matter. In some cases, this might even offer greater potential than simply creating stand-alone minilateral initiatives.

Finally, minilateralism is an approach for the current age and the uncertainties of it. At the global level, the Gulf states face a rise in Chinese influence, including greater economic reach into areas near and beyond the Gulf through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in particular, and China will feature prominently in the Gulf states' trade and investment profiles for the foreseeable future given Beijing's demand for energy imports.¹⁰¹ China is likely to seek to consolidate its place in the Gulf, and perhaps even expand it into a greater security role, if it feels its interests threatened or if a US pullback from the Gulf encourages China to compete with it there. China may also look to new areas of influence if it finds itself confronted more aggressively in East Asia, as seems likely with the expansion of the importance of the Quad and, in September 2021, the announcement of AUKUS, an ambitious Australian-British-US minilateral security strategy that clearly had China in mind in its formulation.¹⁰² The Quad, AUKUS, and other initiatives are also a reminder that the US is indeed shifting its focus towards East Asia and the Pacific, and will

100- Holthaus, "Long Live the Neo-traditional Kings?" pp. 381-403.

101- Yetiv, S. A., and Oskarsson, K. *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf*, Stanford University Press, 2018, pp. 71-84; Narayanappa Janardhan, "Belt and Road Initiative: China's Diplomatic-Security Tool in the Gulf?" *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 1-17.

102- Niblett, R. "AUKUS reveals much about the new global strategic context," *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 18 September 2021, n.p. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/aukus-reveals-much-about-new-global-strategic-context>.

likely soon shift more of its military resources there too.

The Gulf states that have allied themselves with the US in recent times may soon find themselves facing a US with less interest and capacity in the Gulf and a China with more ambition there. Any future US-China rivalry in the Gulf could potentially undermine security in the subregion, especially if Iran and the Arab Gulf states were to side with opposite major powers. There is also the scope, therefore, both for minilateral initiatives to act as a counter to any new wave of external intervention in the subregion, or alternatively (or as well) for minilateralism to serve as a vehicle through which, in such a situation, subregional states might choose to balance the US and China, selectively engaging with one in certain spheres while building a stronger or more comprehensive relationship with the other. Much depends, of course, on the degree to which the international environment changes in the longer-term, especially whether the rules-based international order constructed in large measure by the US and other western powers remains as influential as it is at present, and what roles global middle powers ultimately will play in global security in the coming decades. The answers to these questions remain opaque—another factor arguing in favour of greater use of adaptable, flexible, and specific international arrangements rather than old bilateral ones that seem under pressure or old multilateral ones with, at best, a limited track record of success.

Other changes in global power and external involvement in the Gulf could also see minilateralism utilized as a mechanism. A case in point is India's increasing role in the subregion, especially the fact that the Middle East is its immediate neighbourhood and that it has deeply embedded trade and economic links with the Gulf.¹⁰³ Crucially, as Markakis argues, India's place as a global middle power gives it a propensity towards multilateralism as a mechanism for ensuring a stable international order and a strong set of international coalitions.¹⁰⁴ Exactly the same logic is applicable to many forms of minilateralism, and as one of the members of the Quad, India has already demonstrated an openness to minilateralism. India's proposed Arabian-Mediterranean (Arab-Med) Corridor,¹⁰⁵ linking Indian trade to Europe across key maritime and land routes and taking advantage of the UAE-Israeli rapprochement in 2020, is one example of where minilateral processes might deliver both immediate economic benefits and lay the foundations for more formal, longer-term ones. It would extend India's links to the UAE, create new economic

103- For a good recent outline, see Talmiz Ahmad, "India-Gulf ties over the next decade: Navigating frontier areas for cooperation," *Observer Research Foundation Raisina Debates*, 26 April 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-gulf-ties-next-decade-navigating-frontier-areas-cooperation/>.

104- Markakis, D. "India: A Rising Power in the Persian Gulf?" in Ulrichsen, K. C. (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, Hurst, 2017, pp. 101-102.

105- On this see Michaël Tanchum, "India's Arab-Mediterranean Corridor: A Paradigm Shift in Strategic Connectivity to Europe," *South Asia Scan: Issue No. 14*, Institute for South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, August 2021.

and technology nodes across the Middle East, and serve as both the foundation for new, wider partnerships—potentially including in security and other areas—while also creating new competition for China’s BRI. This will require middle power leadership from India and key states such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, as well as the creation of value chains at key locations on the corridor. It also “fundamentally hinges on how India manages its set of foreign partnerships to participate in the corridor,”¹⁰⁶ which may be one area in which minilateral initiatives could be used very effectively to maintain the focus of key states and create specific success measures and timelines for initiatives. It is an ambitious plan, and one that could prove delicate if it comes to be seen as a (partial) challenge to China’s BRI.

None of the above is to suggest that minilateralism is a substitute for bilateralism and multilateralism; indeed, as already implied, these are likely to remain the salient features of the subregion’s foreign policies. The argument here is simply that minilateralism has been underexamined and remains largely unexplored by leaderships who may find it to be of utility in certain settings and respects. At the same time, it is important to note some of the limitations and risks of minilateralism. There are several.

First, are flexible and often focused minilateral arrangements strong enough to resolve the serious problems that bedevil the Gulf?¹⁰⁷ Or is the subregion’s propensity to overcommit to international fora, and to extract domestic benefit from them rather than focus on their diplomatic or security potential, enough to ensure that minilaterals will find the same sort of fate as multilaterals have? Also lurking in the equation is the capacity for major powers to force, influence, or undermine a minilateral in the subregion, according to their interests. Proponents of minilateralism would argue that the benefits of them outweigh such risks, especially where they are entered into willingly and where the scope of the initiative is clearly understood and agreed. Certainly, their flexibility, lack of bureaucracy, and targeted *raison d’être* can be strengths, but warnings along the lines noted still need to be taken into account as well. The best minilateral strategies will also include at least some future planning, especially for how to create a more enduring structure and process if the initiative ends up proving successful or requiring a stronger commitment from the parties.

A second and related matter is that the informality of minilateralism is a double-edged sword: it is both its “lifeblood” and yet also something that carries considerable risk.¹⁰⁸ Its adaptable structure and, in many cases, the lack of a governance structure can make minilateral processes easy to establish, but may

106- Ibid., p. 5.

107- Patrick, “The New ‘New Multilateralism,’” p. 127.

108- Anuar and Hussain, “Minilateralism for Multilateralism in the Post-Covid Age,” p. 4.

also give them a lack of ownership or no clear leadership. They are also easily cancelled, or simply left to ossify, if disagreements end up hampering them, or simply if no state is sufficiently motivated to maintain their momentum. This is a particular risk in the Middle East, where shifting alliances and relationships quickly alter the focus and priorities of states, and where conflicts quickly arise. One solution here may be to link minilaterals to existing security bodies such as the GCC.¹⁰⁹ For all the problems the GCC has had, and its limited successes, actions are often undertaken in its name. Even if this is only for convenience or for the sake of domestic appearances of unity, branding specific initiatives with the imprimatur of an established body nonetheless may be part of the answer of how to ensure the success of a specific minilateral. Alternatively, a focus on small minilateral groupings, ideally of three, four, and no more than six partners, may help both in promoting communication among the partners and in minimizing the risks of it being undermined or manipulated by one of them. All the better if there are a clear set of goals, and preferably standards for measuring success and failure, established from the beginning.

A third issue is the fact that minilaterals tend to be voluntary arrangements without enforcement mechanisms. This is less of an issue where the initiative morphs into a more formal arrangement, but at the initial stage there is often little in the way of structures to ensure adoption and adherence to measures agreed upon by the partners. Again, this is not a minor problem in the Middle Eastern and Gulf contexts, where interests and commitments often shift suddenly. Substantial multilateral initiatives such as the Arab Cooperation Council mentioned earlier show how easily and rapidly a body can sink into irrelevance and, soon after, cease to exist.¹¹⁰ While a formal body, the ACC is perhaps still a useful pointer for Arab states engaging in minilateralism, since the opportunism behind the ACC, the rivalries among two of its members (Egypt and Iraq), and the lack of compatibility in the strategic (Iraq) and economic (Egypt and Yemen) goals that its partners had were all sources of its undoing.¹¹¹ Such differences and hindrances to success are no less important for minilateral groupings, even if the stakes are, typically, a little less.

There are other criticisms and warnings about possible flaws or weaknesses in minilaterals, but these are perhaps less significant for the Gulf. For example, it is often claimed that minilateralism, especially if it ambitious and ultimately successful in its goals, can undermine formal institutions.¹¹² This may be a pertinent point when examining, say, how the EU ought to approach minilateralism, or whether the United Nations or the World Trade Organization should support it. In the case

109- This point is made more generally in Moret, "Effective minilateralism for the EU," pp. 3-4.

110- Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, pp. 89-90.

111- *Ibid.*, p. 89.

112- Patrick, "The New 'New Multilateralism'," pp. 127-128.

of the Gulf, however, and as already discussed, the existing multilateral institutions are already weak enough that some successes by minilateral initiatives is unlikely to (further) undermine them. Perhaps a success or two using a minilateral approach might even give existing formal institutions some impetus and energy. Along somewhat similar lines, criticisms that minilateralism is not usually an effective vehicle for reaching “grand bargains” is a fair one, but in the case of the Gulf, any such major breakthrough—say, as examples, a comprehensive agreement for a security and economic cooperation architecture incorporating all eight states of the Gulf, or a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement—are extremely unlikely to come from such an approach. They are much more likely to be the product of a wider, perhaps even global, effort or of an initiative by a major actor such as the United States—and they almost-certainly would only be reached through a much more formal process.

Having noted these issues, the fact remains that as minilateralism becomes an increasing feature of international relations in other regions, it is probably going to move increasingly towards the Gulf and perhaps encourage some states to experiment with minilateral arrangements. Given the paucity of effective security architecture in the subregion, the strength of bilateral arrangements that the Arab Gulf states have made with external powers since 1945, and the shifting global security situation at present, some experiments with minilateralism are not only likely, but could well contain the seeds needed to deliver at least some limited successful outcomes. The Arab Gulf states could also find themselves countered or constrained by minilaterals in areas where they seek to engage, including as a result of their own rivalries. A recent report by the International Crisis Group made this point in an examination of the competition currently playing out in the Horn of Africa between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, noting that an Intergovernmental Authority on Development has long existed¹¹³ and that a Red Sea Forum has been proposed as an enhanced platform within the Horn to share information and member-states’ concerns.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Given everything outlined above, what is the likely future for minilateralism in the Gulf? Is it a pathway to more effective international cooperation and dialogue?

If the choice is a simple one of choosing between trying minilateralism or not—with the latter being to simply retain the status quo—then there is little for most states,

113- The IGAD was established in 1996, succeeding an earlier body. It has eight members: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. For more details see the IGAD website: <https://igad.int/about-us>.

114- International Crisis Group (ICG), “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact,” *Middle East Report No. 206*, International Crisis Group, 19 September 2019, p. 35.

in most cases, to lose by seeing what it might offer. Existing processes do not need to be dismantled in order for unilateral ones to be experimented with; trying unilateral approaches in certain spheres where existing relationships or interests converge is not likely to be a problem (and probably at most only mildly upsetting to other actors); and to a certain extent, existing processes and institutions could be leveraged, or even incorporated to a degree, in the process of seeing what might work in the subregional setting and as the global strategic and economic environment progressively but profoundly shifts.

As already noted, the subregion is likely to see a greater emphasis on unilateralism elsewhere in the world. Depending on how they assess their interests, they may choose to copy one of these models, perhaps taking the lead on an inter-regional initiative backed by a major power such as the United States, or perhaps just engaging in much more modest, subregional experiments. These states, and especially the Arab Gulf states, are unlikely to simply ignore what is clearly becoming a trend in international relations in several parts of the world.

Whether such experiments will succeed—indeed, what measures they might include by which to measure success or failure—remains a matter of conjecture. A survey of the history of multilateralism in the Middle East and in the Gulf region does not offer a lot of comfort for proponents of a more flexible, adaptable approach to diplomacy, but unilateralism and multilateralism are not the same thing; in fact, unilateralism has gained prominence in no small part because of its advantages, real or perceived, over traditional multilateral structures and processes. Ultimately, in the coming years there will be strong forces acting to usurp or undermine genuine attempts at unilateralism in the Gulf, but also very powerful forces encouraging the states of the subregion to test it.

