



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Hints of Gulf Rapprochement: Iranian Tactics Might Be Paying Off

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Fears of a potential military conflict with Iran may have opened the door to a Saudi-Iranian dialogue against the backdrop of a rethink of US military logistics, involving at least a [gradual partial relocation to the US of command and control operations](#) based in the Gulf for almost four decades.

Notwithstanding Gulf suspicions that the US is gradually withdrawing from the Middle East, the possible relocation to the US of some command and control operations that have been based in the Gulf for almost 40 years does not necessarily signal a reduced US commitment to the defense of the strategic energy-rich region.

Nonetheless, the move, officially intended to reduce the vulnerability of US military assets to a potential Iranian strike without decreasing the US's operational capability, is bolstering a rethink in capitals across Eurasia, including Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, New Delhi, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh about possible alternative, more collective, multilateral security arrangements in the Gulf.

The arrangements would involve the Gulf states, Russia, China, the US, the EU, and India, as well as other stakeholders – a likely reference to Iran. By necessity, it would require a lowering of tensions in the region and a degree of accommodation between Riyadh and Tehran.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi urged the Gulf states “to establish [a platform for dialogue and consultation](#) in which countries from outside the region would play a role in maintaining security in the region.”

Wang was speaking days after Iranian president Hassan Rouhani proposed a [security arrangement that would be limited to countries in the region](#).

In a variation on the theme, Narayanappa Janardhan, a prominent Indian Gulf researcher at the UAE's Emirates Diplomatic Academy, suggested that [a new regional security architecture should be Asian-led](#).

President Donald Trump's transactional approach toward foreign and defense policies, in which countries are expected to shoulder their fair burden and pay for US defense services, coupled with his longstanding assertion that China and others dependent on energy supplies from the Gulf [are free-riding beneficiaries of the US defense umbrella](#) – as well as his withdrawal early in his presidency from the Trans-Pacific Partnership regional trade pact has sparked doubts across Asia about the wisdom of depending on the US for energy security.

In a sense, the Gulf and Asian nations are in a bind. The US may no longer be reliable, but despite the calls for a new security arrangement, few see a realistic alternative.

“Having just spent three days in Moscow, I'm convinced [the Russians haven't the faintest clue how to operate any architecture in the Gulf](#) ... let alone a security architecture,” tweeted Gulf scholar Michael Stephens.

Concern that military retaliation for last month's attacks on two key Saudi oil facilities would spark a regional war have sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity and a search for non-military responses as the US and Saudi Arabia point the finger of responsibility at Iran.

Iran has warned that military retaliation by the US and/or the kingdom would [spark a war that would spread to the Gulf](#), with Iranian targeting installations in the region.

Trump's cautious reaction to the attacks, coupled with [Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's stated preference for a non-military response](#), constitute the latest developments in recent months that have opened the door to the Chinese-backed Russian proposal for a collective security arrangement that would reduce US influence in the region.

Saudi and Iranian leaders, in the faint hope that the two countries may be inching toward one another, expressed an interest in resolving issues politically rather than militarily.

["The political and peaceful solution is much better than the military one,"](#) Prince Muhammad told CBS News when asked about a possible military response to the attacks on the kingdom's oil assets.

Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani responded, saying: "[The doors of Iran are open.](#) A Saudi-Iranian dialogue can solve many of the region's security and political problems."

In a further hopeful development, [Saudi Arabia was reported to be considering a partial ceasefire in Yemen.](#) Earlier, the Houthis declared a unilateral halt to the fighting. Larijani said Iran was advising the Houthis to accept whatever ceasefire was on offer.

At the same time, [Iraq suggested that it had established a backchannel between Riyadh and Tehran.](#)

"The Saudis have conditions before the negotiation process starts and the same with the Iranians. We have liaised these conditions to each side. It is not an easy task to get together two opposite sides in terms of their ideology, sect, and alliances in the region," said Abbas al-Hasnawi, an official in the office of Iraqi PM Adel Abdul Mahdi.

"Saudi Arabia's conditions are that Iran minimize its role in Yemen and Syria and stop supporting armed groups such as the Houthis. It also asks the Syrian regime to solve its problems with the Syrian opposition groups, and to write a constitution for Syria with all parties agreeing on it," the official said.

"If there will be a potential deal in the region that includes Yemen, Syria and Iraq, the Americans have no problem with that," Hasnawi added.

While there is every reason to be skeptical that Saudi Arabia and Iran are anywhere near resolving their differences, talk of dialogue and calls for a Yemen ceasefire suggest that Iran's strategy of strategic escalation may be producing results.

Earlier this year, Iran moved away from its initial strategic patience response to the US's withdrawal from the 2015 international agreement curbing the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. It shifted to a strategy of gradual escalation.

Escalation tactics include a step-by-step breaching of the agreement and a more aggressive asymmetric military posture involving the seizing of a British vessel that was released last week, alleged attacks on tankers off the coast of the UAE, and allegedly the attacks on the Saudi oil facilities.

Said Eldar Mamedov, an advisor to the Social Democrats in the European parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee: The "sequence of events shows that, thus far, [the Iranian strategy of calculated counter-escalation is working](#)... By escalating on its own, Iran forced a number of key players to change their cost-benefit calculus."

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