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Is it time to establish a security architecture in the Middle East?

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Is it time to establish a security architecture in the Middle East?

Abstract:

For decades, the development of collective defence, collective security, and, more recently, cooperative security structures in one of the most unstable regions of the globe has been unsuccessful. The differences between the regional powers' respective geopolitical visions and the global powers' conflicting interests have operated as an obstacle that is, thus far, insurmountable. Nevertheless, despite the regional polarization and great unrest, there currently exist opportunities that could be seized by global powers, particularly by the United States, in order to advance their global interests.

Keywords:

Middle East, security architecture, arms control, weapons of mass destruction.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

¿Ha llegado el momento de establecer una arquitectura de seguridad en Oriente Medio?

Resumen:

Desde hace décadas, la formación de estructuras de defensa colectiva, de seguridad colectiva y, más recientemente, de seguridad cooperativa en una de las regiones más inestables del globo ha sido infructuosa. Las diferencias en las respectivas visiones geopolíticas de las potencias regionales y los intereses contrapuestos de las potencias globales han constituido un obstáculo hasta el momento insalvable. Sin embargo, a pesar de la polarización y de la elevada tensión regional, el momento actual presenta oportunidades que podrían ser aprovechadas por las potencias globales, en particular, por Estados Unidos, para avanzar en la satisfacción de sus intereses globales.

Palabras clave:

Oriente Medio, arquitectura de seguridad, control de armamentos, armas de destrucción masiva.

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Introduction

Despite being the world's most unstable region, the Middle East still lacks a minimum security architecture to manage the many regional tensions and defuse potential conflicts. And not because it has not been tried. In addition to a multitude of bilateral security or defence agreements, which are beyond the scope of this paper, initiatives to establish crisis management and arms control mechanisms, and even to create cooperative security organisations, have been proposed since the Cold War, but have so far failed to materialise.

Before addressing this topic, it is worth noting that, chronologically speaking, security partnerships or alliances have evolved from security models in which countries grouped around a similar ideology faced a common military threat, such as NATO in its origins (collective defence), to models with a broader vision of security that includes aspects beyond mere military defence (collective security). Today, the idea of co-operative security has become more widely recognised.

Based on the premise that no state or group of states can tackle today's security problems in isolation, this concept promotes the idea that trust needs to be built not only between states, but also with other non-state actors through discussion, negotiation, cooperation and engagement¹. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, which has its roots in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975² and has evolved along with these concepts, is undoubtedly one of the organisations best suited to this broad vision of security. The Atlantic Alliance has also adapted to this trend by including in its Strategic Concept (2010)³, in addition to defence in the traditional sense, crisis management and activities such as the establishment of partnerships with relevant countries and other international organisations, arms control, non-proliferation, disarmament, open door policies, etc., thereby seeking to guarantee the security of allies with as comprehensive an approach as possible.

¹ LABORIE, Mario, La evolución del concepto de seguridad, IEEE Framework Document 05/2011, June 2011. Available at [La Evolución del Concepto de Seguridad \(Junio 2011\) \(ieeee.es\)](#) (accessed on March 2021).

² Helsinki Final Act, 1975. Available at [Conferencia sobre la Seguridad y Cooperación en Europa Acta Final \(osce.org\)](#) (accessed in March 2021).

³ Active Engagement, Modern Defence, Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 19-20 November 2010. Available at [Strat Concept web en.pdf \(nato.int\)](#) (accessed in March 2021).

It is precisely a security architecture that allows for a sincere dialogue between regional actors as a step towards overcoming deep-rooted mistrust that seems to be needed to stabilise the region. A question arises in this respect: What has been done and what is being done? What initiatives are there? And above all, is now the right time to look for solutions? This paper aims to answer these questions.

Collective defence and security

The first attempts to formalise something resembling a military alliance in the Middle East took place in the second half of the last century with the signing in April 1950 of the Treaty of Defence and Economic Cooperation between the member states of the Arab League⁴ (then Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt and Yemen)⁵. The Treaty, clearly inspired by the 1949 Washington Treaty, NATO's founding document, also included a collective defence clause obliging signatories to consider "consider any [act of] armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all" and to "undertake to go without delay to the aid of the State or States against which such an act of aggression is made" (Art. 2). But although a Standing Military Commission and a Joint Defence Council were established under the Treaty (Arts. 5 and 6) to coordinate all related military activities, the fact is that the division of the Arab world has made unity of action impossible. Neither the Suez crisis in 1956, nor the wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973, nor, more recently, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, has the Arab League been able to articulate a coordinated response in application of the Treaty, which, to all intents and purposes, can be considered a dead letter. The last noteworthy attempt to promote coordinated military action was the Joint Arab Force project of 2015, an idea that has, however, failed to make it beyond the theoretical level⁶.

⁴ The Arab League was founded in 1945.

⁵ Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League, 17 June 1950. Available on the website of the Lillian Goldman Law Library [The Avalon Project : Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League, 17 June 1950 \(yale.edu\)](#) (accessed on March 2021).

⁶ In March 2015 the League announced the creation of a Joint - combined Arab Force that was to include up to 40,000 troops from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Jordan, but the project has failed to materialise. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia, the dominant country in the organisation, has sought to lead Arab intervention in the Yemen conflict by assembling a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries that, at least nominally, included forces from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Coalition cohesion has been non-existent and after several years of conflict and despite US logistical and intelligence support, little progress has been made on the ground. President Biden's decision to cut off US support for it has finally done the trick.

In the Cold War environment of blocs' confrontation and following the strategic alignments of the time, the famous Baghdad Pact of 1955 formed another of the collective defence structures characteristic of the period: the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), which linked Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and the United Kingdom with the declared intention of containing the growing influence of the Soviet Union in the region. With hardly any achievements to its credit, the organisation existed officially until its dissolution in 1979, following Iran's exit as a result of the triumph of the Islamic revolution.

Some progress has also been made, albeit very timidly, in the small group of six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council⁷ (GCC) to try to add a security dimension to the organisation's aims. The threat that revolutionary Iran posed to the stability of the Persian Gulf states led them to establish the *Peninsula Shield Force* (PSF) in 1982, a multinational force that theoretically integrated military units from all GCC countries. More recently, the member states of the organisation have strengthened their commitment to military cooperation by signing a defence agreement (2000) which included a mutual defence clause⁸.

Over time, this organisation has reached a certain level of development. Under the supreme authority of the GCC and the direction of the Supreme Military Committee, which is composed of the respective Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces (CHODs) and holds regular meetings⁹, a Joint Combined Command structure has been created with its headquarters in Hafr al Batin, Saudi Arabia. Its Commander is a Saudi general officer and includes a Deputy Commander, which is held on a rotating basis by the other member nations, and a small staff. The force consists of two Saudi brigade-type units located in Hafr al Batin and forward elements that would host military units from the other GCC countries (Figure 1)¹⁰.

⁷ The GCC was established in 1981 including Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia as an intergovernmental organisation to facilitate the political and economic cooperation of its member states. Available at gcc-sg.org (gcc-sg.org) (accessed in March 2021).

⁸ GCC approves joint defence proposal, *Gulfnews.com*. Available at [GCC approves joint defence proposal | Uae - Gulf News](http://www.gulfnews.com) (accessed in March 2021).

⁹ The last one in Muscat (Oman) in November 2020. Supreme Military Committee of GCC Armed Forces Chiefs of Staff meets, *Oman Observer*, 12 November 2020. Available at [Supreme Military Committee of GCC Armed Forces Chiefs of Staff meets \(omanobserver.om\)](http://omanobserver.om) (accessed in March 2021).

¹⁰ ALSIRI, Faisal Mohammed, Gulf Cooperation Council: Arabian Gulf Cooperation Continues Defence Forces (Peninsula Shield Force). US Army Command and General Staff College monograph, May 2015.



Figure 1: The *Peninsula Shield Force*. Prepared internally.

But despite appearances, the organisation's achievements have been rather modest. The activation should take place by unanimous decision of the Supreme Council and, historically, this procedure has always experienced considerable difficulties. Unable to stop Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and remaining on the sidelines of the US-led operations in Iraq in 2003, its intervention in Bahrain in 2011 to crush popular uprisings threatening the regime has been considered as a unilateral Saudi intervention rather than a multinational operation. The subsequent rift within the GCC in 2017, with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE severing relations with Qatar has virtually paralysed the organisation and, although the recent normalisation of relations opens a window of opportunity for further development, it remains to be seen whether this is really possible.

It is essential in this context to refer to the project promoted by President Trump in 2017 in which, considering the need of the Gulf countries to strengthen their security against Iran, he proposed the establishment of a defensive alliance, the *Middle East Strategic Alliance* (MESA), which in different forums has come to be called Arab NATO. Based on

the Atlantic Alliance model, the MESA sought to add Jordanian and Egyptian forces to the armed forces of the GCC members. The total numbers were, quite simply, impressive¹¹: more than 350,000 troops, some 2,500 tanks and nearly 1,500 combat aircraft. More interestingly, there was even the possibility of alliance cooperation with Israel, at least indirectly, which could have provided intelligence or some critical capability such as air defence. On the other hand, such an alliance would allow the US to reduce its military forces in the Middle East in order to dedicate them to a region that is currently a priority for the US: the Pacific.

But once again, internal division in the GCC has frozen the initiative for the time being. Two successes of US diplomacy in the final days of the Trump administration have dramatically changed the landscape and opened up new expectations: the restoration of relations between Qatar and the rest of the GCC countries and the establishment of relations with Israel by Arab countries (UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco) in what have become known as the “Abraham Accords”. It is rather clear that, despite not being officially among the countries that have signed agreements with Israel, none of this could have happened without Saudi Arabia's acquiescence. The situation may not yet be ripe for the latter's rapprochement with Israel in an ostensible and publicised way, but contacts exist and covert cooperation on an issue as important to both countries as Iran is likely¹².

It is true that the new Biden administration has been committed to a 'two-state' solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict¹³, but it is no less true that in the past they have been extremely hostile to the 'deal of the century' promoted by the Trump administration in January 2020, which ultimately made the Abraham Accords possible. It will be difficult to reconcile the two visions, but ignoring the opportunities that this situation offers the US does not seem to be the right thing to do. Consequently, a revitalisation of this initiative cannot be ruled out at this stage.

¹¹ Data from Military Balance 2020, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*.

¹² In fact, in November 2020, a supposedly secret meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi heir Mohammed bin Salman in the futuristic Red Sea city of Neom was leaked to the international press.

¹³ Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed in March 2021).

Cooperative security initiatives

As we have seen from what we have covered so far, all of these initiatives respond to the Cold War models of defence alliances or, as the case may be, collective security, articulated to confront a common enemy or common threats. The establishment of cooperative security structures that, among other considerations, could provide a forum for debate in which legitimate regional rivalries could be addressed by the protagonists has scarcely been considered.

The reasons for this apparent disinterest are manifold. Starting with the mutual distrust among regional actors that leads them to interpret their rivalry in zero-sum terms, a consequence of very different threat perceptions along the multiple fault lines that divide the Middle East and give rise to multifaceted conflicts.

Secondly, the absence, as a consequence of the above, of a state capable of exercising clear and unequivocal leadership along the lines of that exercised by the US in NATO. This means that any attempt to do so requires external "tutelage", which can only be provided by one of the major global powers: The US or China or, ideally, by all three together.

Unfortunately, however, the rivalry that pits the latter against each other on a global scale manifests itself, irremediably, on a regional scale, making cooperation almost impossible. Additionally, the security umbrella that the US has provided almost unconditionally to countries such as Israel and, since the adoption of the Carter doctrine in the 1980s, to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, has discouraged the search for and adoption of compromises and, to a certain extent, exacerbated the security dilemmas present in the region.

Still, the escalation of tension between the US and Iran since mid-2019, which peaked with the removal of the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps special forces, General Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020, made it clear that a multilateral solution is now more necessary than ever. While the US adopted a strategy of deterrence to "ensure freedom of navigation" in the Persian Gulf and proposed the formation of a

naval coalition to patrol these waters¹⁴, Russia proposed its Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf region based on three principles:¹⁵

1. Progressive development, so that the necessary security structures and mechanisms (confidence- and security-building measures, CSBMs) can be agreed and put in place in a progressive (step-by-step) manner;
2. Multilateralism, involving regional and international actors with security interests and responsibilities in the region; and
3. Strict observance of international law, in particular the United Nations Charter and UN Security Council Resolutions.

To this end, Russia proposed as a long-term goal the creation of a Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organisation (PGSCO) that would include, in addition to the Gulf countries, other countries such as the US, Russia, China and India, as well as regional organisations (Arab League, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, GCC, etc.) and international organisations such as the European Union.

The proposal includes the need for arms control agreements as well as measures to transform the region into a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, which is discussed below. On the other hand, the concept recognises the need to resolve first and foremost the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the issues that has the greatest impact on regional stability. If this need is met, the concept could be expanded to the entire Middle East and North Africa region.

Of course, it is an ambitious concept on which the US has been reluctant to comment, perhaps aware that the implementation of such a project could end up calling into question its security objectives in the region, which include limiting the influence of "revisionist powers" in the first instance.

A different attitude has been adopted by China which, both because of its dependence on energy imports from the region and its interest in the development of the Belt and Road, needs a Middle East that is as stable as possible. China has spoken out on

¹⁴ U.S. wants military coalition to safeguard waters off Iran, Yemen, *REUTERS*, 9 July 2019. Available at [U.S. wants military coalition to safeguard waters off Iran, Yemen | Reuters](#) (accessed in March 2021).

¹⁵ Russia's security concept for the Gulf area, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 23 July 2019. Available from [Российская Концепция коллективной безопасности в зоне Персидского залива - Конфликты - Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации \(mid.ru\)](#) (accessed in March 2021).

numerous occasions in favour of seeking multilateral solutions built and supported by regional powers, while scrupulously respecting the principle of non-interference by major powers in the internal affairs of states. It is precisely the latter issue, which allows countries in the region, from Israel to Iran, to establish beneficial trade relations, that makes cooperation with China very attractive, especially for those, such as Iran, whose relations with Western countries, in particular the US, are strained.

China would be in favour of supporting the organisation of a Middle East peace and security conference along the lines of the Russian initiative¹⁶, identifying roles for regional powers and external actors, and in this vein organised the Middle East Security Forum in November 2019, which brought together more than 200 representatives from 30 countries in the region and China itself to discuss security issues. Nothing concrete actually emerged from the forum¹⁷, but since then China has been very active in promoting inclusive regional security solutions. In this regard, during the recent visit of its foreign minister to the region¹⁸, China outlined an initiative to achieve "regional stability and security" based on "mutual respect, maintenance of equality and justice, non-proliferation, collective security and development cooperation"¹⁹, proposing to host security conferences for the Persian Gulf region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict²⁰. The initiative has been welcomed by some of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, such as France²¹, but the US has not yet taken a position.

Initiatives of regional origin do not abound, with Iran being the only country that has put its own vision of cooperative security on the table. In September 2019, during the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani

¹⁶ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on July 25, 2019, *PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs* press release. Available at [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on 25 July 2019 \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/press/201907/25/262805/t1864767.shtml) (accessed in March 2021).

¹⁷ Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong Attends the Middle East Security Forum, *PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs* Press Release, 27 November 2019. Available at [Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong Attends the Middle East Security Forum \(fmprc.gov.cn\)](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/press/201911/27/262805/t1864767.shtml) (accessed in March 2021).

¹⁸ The visit took place from 24-30 March 2021 and included Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Bahrain, Bahrain, UAE and Oman.

¹⁹ Wang Yi Proposes a Five-point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 26 March 2021. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1864767.shtml (accessed in March 2021).

²⁰ China plans to invite Palestinians and Israelis for talks, *REUTERS*, 24 March 2021. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-mideast-israel-yemen-idUSKBN2BG10E> (accessed in March 2021).

²¹ China - Middle East - Q&A from the press briefing (26 March 2021), *France Diplomacy*, 26 March 2021. Available at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/china/news/article/china-middle-east-q-a-from-the-press-briefing-26-mar-2021> (accessed in March 2021).

presented the *Hormuz Peace Endeavour* (HOPE) initiative²². This initiative, to which all the Arab states of the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman and Qatar) were invited to join, referred to the formation of a new Strait of Hormuz community based on principles such as good neighbourliness, commitment to the objectives of the United Nations, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, peaceful resolution of disputes, rejection of the use of force and participation in coalitions or alliances against any of them, non-interference in the affairs of other states, and mutual respect for historical and religious sites and symbols²³.

None of the recipients of the invitation were enthusiastic about the proposal, although some of them did not openly reject it either. However, subsequent developments within the GCC, such as the resumption of relations between Qatar and the other members and the Abraham agreements, show little real interest in taking this route and a clear preference for maintaining reasonably good relations with the US.



Figure 2: Collective and cooperative security initiatives for the Middle East. Prepared internally.

²² Letter from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN Secretary-General, dated 9 December 2019. Available at <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/581> (accessed in March 2021).

²³ FM Zarif's Al-Rai Article on Hormuz Peace Endeavour, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 10 October 2019. Available at <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/544114/fm-zarif%E2%80%99s-al-rai-article-on-hormuz-peace-endeavour> (accessed in March 2021).

Arms control and weapons of mass destruction (WMD)

One of the aspects to be considered in the broad framework of cooperative security is arms control in general and the control of weapons of mass destruction in particular. This need is reflected in the recent proposals for collective or cooperative security mentioned above, although the first attempts to articulate an arms control regime date back years. However, all initiatives have ultimately run aground in addressing the thorny issue of Israel's nuclear capability, a reality since the 1960s²⁴.

Israel's nuclear arsenal has been of equal concern to Arab countries and Iran, to the extent that, even without developing common policies on the issue, it has led to coordinated action. Such is the case of the 1975 joint Iranian-Egyptian proposal to the UN General Assembly to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East (NWFZ), later expanded (1990) to include all types of WMD (WMDFZ). This is an initiative that was intended to fit into the arms control regime promoted by the UN, which, since the establishment of the first of these in 1967 in Latin America²⁵, has spread to other regions of the world: the South Pacific (1985), Southeast Asia (1995), Africa (1996) and Central Asia (2006).

In parallel, the Madrid Peace Conference (1991), in which 13 Arab states and Israel participated, in addition to a Palestinian delegation, agreed on the creation of a specific working group on arms control and regional security (ACRS). Although the group held several plenary sessions, some of which were chaired by the US and Russia, and agreed on certain confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), such as notification of military exercises or exchanges of information, disagreements between Egypt and Israel over integrating the deliberations for the establishment of the NWFZ into this framework eventually brought the group's activities to an indefinite halt in 1995²⁶.

In November 2019, 22 Middle Eastern states, including Iran and Saudi Arabia and with the notable absence of Israel, participated in the Conference for the Establishment of a

²⁴ Israel, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), maintains a policy of neither admitting nor denying possession of nuclear weapons. It has an estimated 90 nuclear warheads with plutonium technology and would have produced enough plutonium for an additional 200 warheads. Fact Sheet: Israel's Nuclear Inventory, *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, 30 March 2020. Available at <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-israels-nuclear-arsenal/> (accessed in March 2021).

²⁵ Treaty of Tlatelolco.

²⁶ ERÄSTÖ, Tytti, The arms control-regional security nexus in the Middle East, *EU Non-proliferation and Disarmament Consortium*, No. 68, April 2020.

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction convened by the UN Secretary-General to try to revitalise this initiative²⁷. Although COVID-19 has been forced to slow down its activities and postpone its meetings, the conference has the potential to become one of the few fora in which Iran and Arab countries can engage in face-to-face dialogue on security issues that directly affect them. But it is unlikely that Israel will eventually join, which, de facto, brings the Conference to a dead end, as nothing can be achieved in WMD control without the participation of the region's only nuclear power.

Iran's claimed nuclear capability and delivery vehicles are another stumbling block, although Iran's participation in the Conference suggests that, under certain circumstances, Iran would be ready to compromise. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is one element that, while partially addressing the issue, could serve as a basis for further elaboration and contribute to the establishment of a WMDFZ. Provided the US decides to rejoin and Iran returns to scrupulous compliance with its clauses by reversing the latest breaches of limits on uranium enrichment levels, storage and development of advanced centrifuges²⁸. None of them are irreversible and could well have been adopted to provide negotiating capacity in the face of a foreseeable reopening of the negotiating table with the arrival of the new Biden administration. A revitalisation of the JCPOA is not out of the question at this stage, although the negotiation process is expected to be long and difficult.

In any case, both the renegotiation of the JCPOA and any further development of a WMDFZ will have to take into account the legitimate aspirations expressed by some of the countries in the region for the development of peaceful nuclear energy as signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt and the UAE, as well as Iran and Turkey). Renegotiating the JCPOA may be a first step, but in the long term, a process that encompasses the full range of the nuclear issue should

²⁷ Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, *United Nations website*. Available at <https://www.un.org/disarmament/topics/conference-on-a-mezf-of-nwadowomd/> (accessed in March 2021).

²⁸ Iran has been breaching the limits imposed by the treaty in a sequential process, exceeding the limits on storage of enriched uranium (300Tm) and heavy water (130Tm), the uranium enrichment limit of 3.67%, the suspension of the development of advanced centrifuges and has resumed enrichment activities at the Fordow facility.

eventually include these countries as well as Israel. That, of course, is unlikely to happen tomorrow.

In conclusion, is the right time to build cooperative security in the Middle East?

The need to establish a security architecture in what has been perhaps the most unstable region of the globe has been felt for decades and, despite the efforts undertaken, remains an elusive goal. Few initiatives have been launched in the region and even fewer have been able to develop at least minimally, let alone reach maturity. All of them have revolved around the concepts of collective defence or, as the case may be, collective security, articulated to confront a common enemy or common threats, and the few cooperative security initiatives have not gone beyond proposals on which the states involved remain reluctant even to pronounce themselves.

The different understanding of how conflict in the region threatens the stability of each of the regional powers is the cause of a deep mutual distrust that prevents any of them from aspiring to exercise leadership, or dominance, similar to that which the United States exercises unchallenged in NATO - leadership that, willingly or unwillingly, is accepted by all NATO partners. Without this condition, the formation of regional security structures is almost impossible, and the assistance of global powers is essential. The latter, in turn, are locked in a confrontation for global hegemony that is taking on more and more of the characteristics of the power struggles that characterised the Cold War.

Even so, Russia and China, extremely sensitive to the maintenance of regional stability because of the consequences that, for various reasons, its absence could have on their respective economies, have put their proposals on the table. The United States, which through bilateral agreements has been able to secure a steadily increasing military presence, has never shown much interest in the formation of such multilateral cooperative security mechanisms and structures in the region. In the current circumstances, it remains to be seen whether it will agree to negotiate on the basis of either of the existing proposals, articulate its own proposal, or simply opt for neither, depending on the extent to which they suit its global interests in the first instance and regional interests in the second.

In this regard, let us not lose sight of the fact that, despite the apparent changes in form announced by the new Biden administration, its security objectives have changed little

from those that guided the Trump administration. The outlines of the new US security strategy have only just begun to emerge, but it is established from the outset that the distribution of power towards an increasingly "assertive" China and a "disruptive" Russia remain the primary threats to the "international order that the US helped to establish". As far as the Middle East is concerned, the staunch defence of Israel and Iran as the greatest "challenge to regional stability" remain the cornerstones of its foreign policy. However, the rapprochement of Arab states with Israel and the re-establishment of dialogue within the GCC paint a different picture that offers new opportunities for a US administration that recognises that "military force [need not be] the answer to the region's challenges"²⁹.

Much time has passed since Carter formulated his Middle East doctrine in the 1980s, and the importance of the Middle East as a source of hydrocarbon imports for the US has declined considerably. The US remains in the region more for the purpose of not leaving a vacuum to be filled by the "revisionist powers"³⁰ than for any other reason related to global energy supply.

The time may be right for the US to adapt or recalibrate its Middle East foreign policy and in this regard, the formation of a cooperative security organisation, which would necessarily include Iran, could be helpful. Such a scheme would require certain compromises and a pragmatic recognition of the difficulty of completely blocking Iran's expansion in the region. In return, the US could significantly reduce its military presence, maintain its regional alliance scheme and, at least partially, contain the penetration and influence of the "revisionist powers". But, paradoxically, such an organisation cannot be effective without the active collaboration of Russia and China.

On the other hand, a minimum security architecture should include mechanisms for arms control and weapons of mass destruction. The revitalisation of the Iran nuclear deal may be a first step in that direction, and indeed indirect negotiations have already started in the course of the JCPOA joint commission meeting (6 April 2021). This is certainly a positive gesture, but in reality it is only a partial one. Sooner or later, the thorny issue of arms control and nuclear proliferation would have to be addressed for the entire region, which would necessarily include not only Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programme, but also Israel's nuclear capability. In addition to integrating the other countries into the

²⁹ Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed in March 2021).

³⁰ Terminology used in the US National Security Strategy, December 2017.

process. It is no easy task, of course, and following the model of the formation of collective and cooperative security structures in other parts of the world, we know that their development can only be undertaken gradually, progressively, in small, necessarily partial steps that end up extending the process over decades.

The US is poised to reassume global leadership, or dominance, "first and foremost through diplomacy", although its recent gestures towards President Putin and the recent bilateral meeting with China in Alaska indicate that the tone of this new diplomacy need not necessarily be benign towards the "revisionist powers". A renewed confrontation is anticipated in the context of which the promotion of cooperative security structures at the regional level, while requiring large doses of political realism, may provide great long-term benefits for US global strategy.

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