

# So Close Yet So Far Apart. Facilitating Dialogue and Cooperation across the Persian Gulf

by Rouzbeh Parsi and Dina Esfandiary

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the shared history and cultural traits of the peoples living around the Persian Gulf, its littoral states are often at loggerheads. Deep-seated rivalries and suspicions continue to plague all attempts to create an inclusive and comprehensive security framework for the region. It is therefore necessary to look beyond the formal channels and methods of creating détente. In this paper we draw on the processes and methods employed in what eventually became OSCE and ASEAN. We argue that the endeavour to facilitate détente in the region requires a broader and more bottom-up approach to fostering mutual confidence and trust. Such Track 2 projects also benefit from a deeper conceptual understanding of peace and security. In short, by thinking in terms of human security other vital aspects of the living conditions and dignity of the populations in the region are taken into account when designing a regional security architecture. This in turn is necessary for the long-term success of such a project.

*Persian Gulf | Regional security | OSCE | ASEAN | Track 2 diplomacy*

keywords

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## FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Rue Montoyer 40 – 1000 Brussels, Belgium

T: +32 2 234 69 00

Email: [info@feps-europe.eu](mailto:info@feps-europe.eu)

Website: <https://www.feps-europe.eu>

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Paper produced in the framework of the FEPS-IAI project “Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East”, October 2020.

The project has benefited from the financial support of the European Parliament and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Parliament or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
and International Cooperation

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by Rouzbeh Parsi and Dina Esfandiary\*

### Introduction: Going beyond hard security

The Middle East, and the Persian Gulf region in particular, is an area with intractable tensions and conflicts. Deep-seated rivalries and suspicions that have been difficult to shake continue to plague inter-state relations. This makes an inclusive regional security architecture and dialogue between governments necessary, but all the more complicated. As a result, creating the conditions for such dialogue by fostering it from the bottom up is vital. And, it is incumbent on those of us in the expert and research communities to do this.

Formal meetings and conferences between high-level officials are how states communicate, while more mundane everyday interaction is undertaken by lower ranking staff. Ideally, those high-level meetings are the tip of an iceberg of inter-ministerial consultations and back-and-forths, ironing out as much as possible so that all that remains is for the representatives to sign the documents and pose in front of a camera. Reality, however, is more complicated. Often, when dealing with more intractable problems or outright conflicts, officials cannot afford to be seen negotiating with their enemies. If the conflict is of a profound nature, solving it in the short term is beyond anyone's grasp. The point of dialogue, in such a context, is to communicate intentions in order to avoid misunderstandings that can exacerbate the conflict further. These are the situations where opening other avenues of dialogue with a different set of people becomes useful – hence, Track 2.<sup>1</sup> Early on, this approach was developed by former diplomats trying to systematise their practical experience, and academics applying scientific insights on human

<sup>1</sup> For an incisive overview of the history and forms of Track 2, see Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015.

\* Rouzbeh Parsi is Director of the European Middle East Research Group (EMERG) and Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. Dina Esfandiary is Board Member of EMERG and Fellow at The Century Foundation.

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psychology and identity (see below). Today, Track 2 formats are more versatile and varied.

This paper will briefly examine the history of tensions in the Persian Gulf before summarising the value of dialogue from below. It will draw on research and work conducted to achieve other regional security architectures, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Association of South-Eastern Asian Nations (ASEAN), and attempt to draw out relevant components for our region. Finally, the paper will offer some recommendations on next steps for the region.

## 1. The Persian Gulf: When is a good time for peace?

The Middle East is a region rife with conflict and tensions. Structural, political, economic and ideological differences between the countries in this area have made reaching an inclusive regional security architecture a real challenge.

The Persian Gulf was traditionally of interest to international powers because of its strategic location on the route to India, and later – on the eve of World War I – because of the discovery of oil. But in the 1970s, when the British left the region and the Gulf Arab sheikhdoms gained independence, rivalries emerged both between the new Gulf Arab states, including on border issues, and between them and regional powers like Iran. Given the internal domestic constraints faced by the new countries, the smaller Gulf Arab states deferred to Riyadh on foreign policy decisions that affected their security in the region.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the smaller Gulf Arab states still feared Saudi hegemony and the imposition of its regional vision. In May 1981, Persian Gulf countries pooled resources under Saudi leadership with the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in response to regional shifts like the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran after the anti-shah revolution of 1978–79. But at the same time, the smaller Gulf Arab states guarded against a potentially domineering Saudi leader by ensuring they would retain decision making and self-sufficiency in defence matters within the organisation at least.<sup>3</sup> Even this effort to join a sub-regional security architecture was fraught with problems, not least that it was not inclusive: major regional security actors were not in the GCC and were in fact the group's main target – namely Iran.

It was inevitable that Iran would pose a threat to its Gulf Arab neighbours. The previous government under Mohammad Reza Shah exploited every opportunity

<sup>2</sup> Khalid Almezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy since 2011", in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, London, Hurst & Company, 2017, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf. Diplomacy, Security and Economy Coordination in a Changing Middle East*, New ed., London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 78.

available to achieve the country's regional ambitions, directly affecting the security of Gulf Arab states.<sup>4</sup> After the revolution in 1978–79, it was the very nature of the new theocratic government in Tehran that posed a threat to the Gulf Arab countries. The Islamic Republic's desire to spread the Islamic revolution in the region<sup>5</sup> and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's public challenges to the legitimacy of the government in Saudi Arabia<sup>6</sup> only worsened the growing distrust and antagonism the Gulf Arab states felt towards Tehran. Over time, Iran's system matured, and the Islamic Republic became increasingly pragmatic. Tehran's involvement in the region became a way for it to secure itself and create a buffer zone between its borders and hostile foreign powers, though the desire to increase Iranian influence in the region remained. As a result, Iran and its regional goals have always been a pressing foreign policy concern for the Gulf Arab states.

But Iran was not the only threat to the Gulf Arab states. Prior to 2003, and especially following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in June 1990, Iraq was also a major concern, one which led to the growth of US military presence in the region.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the US invasion of Iraq removed it as a regional security threat. As a result, the rivalry between the two regional hegemon – Iran vs. Saudi Arabia, supported by its smaller Gulf Arab allies – has since been a fixture in the Persian Gulf region. Today, Iran and the Gulf Arab states compete on several fronts, including political, sectarian and religious, and over their respective visions of regional security.

The 2011 Arab Spring had a profound effect on dynamics in the Persian Gulf region. The wave of unrest that swept across the whole Middle East caught many off guard, including the Gulf Arab states, whose elites also felt threatened by the rising discontent in the region. But the Arab Spring also provided them with an opportunity: the fall of regional powerhouses like Egypt and Syria left a void that the relatively stable Gulf Arab states saw as an opportunity to fill. The Arab Spring also raised questions about Washington's reliability as a security guarantor to the Gulf Arab states, especially after the Obama administration did nothing to prevent the fall of friends in the region. All this made states like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) more assertive in the conduct of their foreign policy. This increased

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Shah's influence and claims to Bahrain prevented the Sheikdom from joining the federation that was being negotiated following the British withdrawal from the region. See Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the International Relations of the Gulf*, cit., p. 17. While he finally relinquished this claim, allowing Bahrain to declare independence on 16 December 1971, he maintained his claims to three islands off the coast of the UAE: Abu Musa, disputed with the emirate of Sharjah, and Greater and Lesser Tunbs, disputed with Ras al Khaimah.

<sup>5</sup> (Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah) Imam Khomeini, *Governance of the Jurist. Islamic Government*, Tehran, The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works – International Affairs Department, 1970, p. 23-24; and "Khomeini: 'We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology'", speech on Radio Tehran (21 March 1980), in *MERIP Reports*, No. 88 (June 1980), p. 22-25, <https://merip.org/?p=8961>.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran. Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*, London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 88 and 127-129.

tensions within the GCC, ultimately leading to the summer 2017 split over Qatar's proximity to Muslim Brotherhood organisations and deviations from the Saudi- and UAE-championed anti-Iran stance.

The Trump administration has done little to help – it has in fact taken steps that have exacerbated regional tensions. On 8 May 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would no longer be party to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and re-imposed all US sanctions on the country. This marked the beginning of the "maximum pressure" campaign. These measures have been accompanied by an increase in aggressive rhetoric and a reframing of routine deployments of aircraft carriers and other military kit to the region, punctuated by actual aggression, including the assassination of the Iranian Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Each step invites a countermeasure by Iran, thereby increasing tensions, uncertainty and the risk of miscalculation.

The US pressure campaign has had one positive effect on the region: the threat of escalation, the belief that the United States will not step in to help and the realisation that it is not imposing the policy with serious consideration for its effects are forcing the Gulf Arab states to take their security into their own hands and seek de-escalation with Iran. As a result, countries like the UAE have engaged in limited, tactical dialogue with Iran to ensure that the latter does not make good on its promise of targeting places like Dubai if the United States engages in hostilities with it. Such de-escalation comes just as the COVID-19 pandemic has also forced countries in the region to work together to mitigate and contain the outbreak. Indeed, regional countries have realised that the virus is not limited by national borders, and that allowing a virus hotspot like Iran to continue unabated would inevitably affect the whole region. As a result, Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours helped it early in its crisis.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, recent incidents in the region, the desire to de-escalate coupled with minor efforts at engagement show us that the time is right for discussions on a road to a serious, inclusive regional security architecture.

## 2. Conceptualising security and peace

What constitutes a state of war or peace is seldom as straightforward as it may seem. The binary may work for slogans, but politics (domestic as well as foreign) can seldom be delineated so clearly. Today, war involves multiple different actors, including non-state actors, and multiple stages and types. A fully sovereign nation state in command of an army and with no competitors except other similarly sovereign powers was a fiction entertained by international relations theoreticians taking short-cuts. In reality, states have seldom been exclusively in control. In fact, the 20th century, with its massive world wars, was perhaps the zenith of

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Benaim et al., "Roundtable: Middle East Strained by COVID-19, But Not Transformed", in *TCF Reports*, 9 June 2020, <https://tcf.org/content/report/roundtable-middle-east-strained-covid-19-not-transformed>.

what we understand to be conventional wars. Today, mercenaries, private military companies, sub-state armed groups, warlords and political movements control territory just as states do, and participate in conflict as states do.<sup>9</sup> At times, they are referred to as proxies, but that belies their local staying power and autonomy vis-à-vis their putative state sponsors. The technology of warfare has changed too. Drones, missiles and cyber warfare are adding new dimensions to the battlefield. These technologies are also no longer the prerogative of major powers in the conventional sense, and the technology transfer is no longer exclusively from state to state. In short, it has become increasingly difficult to identify the party behind a bellicose act.

The absence of a state of war is traditionally understood to confer security to a state. If violent conflict can exist without being at war, however, there is still no security. To be consistent, security itself must be conceptualised as more than binary. Conventionally, security has been understood in terms of military parity and the ability to establish deterrence in military terms. There seems to be a dualism inherent in how this is understood: two adversaries signalling and parrying (metaphorically and literally). Here, the Cold War is instructive in its simple schematic with two global powers with diametrically opposed ideological identities, threatening annihilation and somehow (“miraculously”) avoiding a third world war. But exactly because the stakes were so high eventually even the rhetorical exchange of enmity had to be contained – and even then there were close calls of outright war. The United States and the Soviet Union were however involved in a number of local and regional conflicts, either triggering or prolonging them through their sponsorship of the forces immediately concerned. Thus, the Cold War was not so much a contained war as it was a diverted one – a war by proxy almost everywhere but in the main theatres, exactly because there it would have led to direct confrontation and potentially mutual destruction. To map other conflicts and fissures on this template seldom makes sense.

The situation in the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East is one of multiple actors of varying capabilities, with connections to third parties and great powers, who are constantly vying for advantages or feel compelled to showcase deterrence in various combinations, where the outcomes are most often computed in a zero-sum game. As a result, parity in arms and capabilities is difficult to calculate since the constellation of actors (e.g., alliances) is fluid and unstable. For example, Iran and Qatar do not constitute a “side” that can be confronted or negotiated with by Saudi Arabia. Both countries will enlist other powers to help increase their sense of security: Qatar looks to Turkey in its tensions with Saudi Arabia, while Iran turns to Russia and China to help offset US support of Saudi Arabia. In addition,

<sup>9</sup> There have been many arguments made over whether all of this is new or not (e.g., revolution in military affairs). Two sensible analyses are provided by Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 3rd ed., Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012; and Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2005. For historical examples of irregular warfare see Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor (eds), *Hybrid Warfare. Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the existence of sub-state actors and the above-mentioned “new” technologies incentivise a state of low-intensity war as an alternative to a costly outright war. This in turn means that tangible steps towards a resolution of these tensions are not taken.

But unpacking security is about more than the conditions of conflict and how to mitigate them, it is also about the recipients: Whose security is guaranteed by peace?

### *2.1 The importance of human security*

Regulating hard security is both difficult and insufficient – it cannot contain conflicts, let alone solve them, nor is it a stable arrangement if the involved societies do not buy into it. What human security is has implications for how international relations is understood as a field, and reconfigures what constitutes security and for whom. The international system and international law have viewed the state as the sole actor in play, and as a result, see security as “safety from the use of armed force between states”.<sup>10</sup> Human security shifts the focus from the state as the sole provider and recipient of security to humans, individuals as well as collectives – “from a human security perspective, there is no secure state with insecure people living in it”.<sup>11</sup>

Nowhere is this shift in perspective more pertinent than in the Middle East, where citizens more often than not suffer at the hands of their own government more than any external foe. In this region, it is as much about human dignity, living conditions and access to water, just to name a few, as it is about not being subjected to violence and mistreatment. In addition, human security is the best guarantee that any political agreement on inter-state peace and security will be sustainable. At times states have a vested interest in playing up real or imagined external security threats in order to escape their responsibility for lacklustre performance domestically or to evade calls for greater accountability. While human security is at times dismissed as a fanciful dream, setting human rights and needs on a par with those of states, it has gained an institutional footing internationally as well as regionally.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Gerd Oberleitner, “Human Security: Idea, Policy and Law”, in Mary Martin and Taylor Owen (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Human Security*, London/New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 320.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> For the former see the Human Security Network initiated in 2009 and culminating in UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/290 defining human security, adopted by consensus in 2012, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/66/290>. For the latter see the African Union Non-Aggression and Common Defence Pact, which incorporates a human security perspective in Article 1(k), adopted in 2005 and entered into force in 2009, <https://au.int/en/node/7788>.



### 3. Dialogue from below as a first step

How can we, as the expert community, foster dialogue between both sides of the Persian Gulf? Fostering and creating the conditions for dialogue from “below” is key – and this is where Track 2 comes in. Track 2 refers to a group of non-official meetings, but there are different categories for this approach. Track 1.5 is where former officials or those with proximity to state institutions participate, and thus, the aim and modus operandi are much closer to the priorities and frames of the official level. Track 2 is where academics and experts come to the fore. They understand and view the issues without the burden of having to represent official positions and can think outside the proverbial box. Track 3 brings us even further away from the institutions but closer to the populations – here the objectives are more related to societal issues and the participants are practitioners of a different kind. While non-official dialogue (i.e., dialogue that is not high-level government engagement) will ultimately have very limited gains – it will not lead to major policy changes for the governments in the region because only officials can agree to that – it does create the conditions for individuals in the region from the lower echelons of government, academia and the expert community to grow accustomed to discussing important regional hard security issues and human security issues with one another. It forces individuals who are not used to seeing or interacting with each other regularly to do so. Regularly interacting means that barriers to dialogue are gradually eroded as individuals air their grievances first, and do not feel the need to repeat themselves too much in subsequent meetings. As a result, at the European Middle East Research Group (EMERG), we have been engaged in ensuring that this type of dialogue is permitted, fostered and continues.

Track 2 is today a vast field, both in practice and in how it is theorised and conceptualised. It is important to be mindful of the fact that it is much more than semi-officials meeting behind closed doors with the goal of reconciling states. The academic community has been involved both as participants in such meetings and in systematising the experience by creating theory and method for their development.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Track 2 meetings do not have a specific set of participants (in terms of role or profession), though often it is experts and academics with communication channels to the officials of their country. Nor is the goal to necessarily feed into a more formal and political process. Instead, Track 2 goals span the gamut of managing, resolving or transforming conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Building movements and communities from below are tangible outcomes of Track 2 or Track 3 meetings that have a value in and of themselves.<sup>15</sup> The socio-psychological aspect of the format is crucial to its success. The projects are about changing structures, and the people meeting are seen (whether they like it or not) as representatives of different sides. But participants are also individual actors, working from within

<sup>13</sup> Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, cit., p. 15-22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61-65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22-26.

those structures. The primary purpose of the meeting is therefore to help them overcome the burden of representation through interaction, and become, in a sense, human with one another rather than simply representatives of opposing causes, governments and positions.<sup>16</sup>

At EMERG, we believe dialogue should be by the region and for the region and not rely on US or European involvement. Rather, countries in the region should take responsibility for their own security and engage with the other side in order to ensure that the dialogue can continue irrespective of the involvement of other powers. This, however, does not prevent outside powers from becoming involved in the process, it just means that the process should not depend on them. EMERG also believes in learning from past efforts at negotiating regional security dialogues. As a result, extensive work has been conducted on examining the processes that led to the OSCE and ASEAN in order to extract relevant parts for our region.

In the past few years, EMERG has helped convene a regional Track 1.5/2 for the countries in the Persian Gulf region. It has convened academics, experts, lower-level officials at meetings where regional security was discussed. While the topic of regional security was set in the first meeting, allowing participants to air their grievances first, it then sought to ensure that the participants at the meeting set the agenda for subsequent meetings. As a result, agenda items reflected what participants from the region saw as their main security concerns. Participants were also invited to discuss ways forward and possible solutions to their concerns and to the tensions in the region more generally. This involved moving beyond the simple hard security issues, and included discussions on human security issues, such as environmental change and water scarcity, among others. Conducting the dialogue in this way ensures that issues that are important to the region are discussed, rather than those third powers believe are important – and even more so, that solutions identified by the region, which are by definition more actionable, are pursued, rather than those imagined by third powers.

Then, the dialogue must be maintained. This may seem obvious, but its practical implementation is not. Continued forward momentum is necessary to ensure that Track 2 participants do not default back to their initial position of airing their grievances, as they do the first time. Rather, with continued regular dialogue – even if on issues that have already been discussed – participants will become accustomed to seeing each other regularly, and understanding that despite their origins, they are not too dissimilar in their goals and desires for their countries and the region.

Track 2 processes are therefore vital to ensuring that dialogue continues, especially in the absence of dialogue among the leadership of the countries concerned. They are also vital to creating a grassroots movement in favour of overcoming tensions at a government-to-government level, which will help pressure the leadership to

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

pursue de-escalation and eventually a deeper peace (as discussed in the previous section). The next section will examine how to achieve the second facet of peace: through dialogue between the leaderships of the countries in order to achieve a regional security framework.

#### 4. Precedents and the process of developing security

It is important to assess existing security arrangements and frameworks when envisaging a systematic approach to détente in the region.<sup>17</sup> In this prospective comparison, it is important to distinguish between the process and the end product. In this brief description of OSCE and ASEAN, both their respective processes and eventual institutional forms are relevant. While we will draw lessons from these experiences, it is important that the end goal of a détente process in the Persian Gulf region is determined by the countries of that region.

The OSCE was the main outcome of the détente years, during which the US-led Western alliance and the Soviet bloc engaged in extensive dialogue. The OSCE was preceded by several political initiatives and developments, where various entities and actors tried to find a modus operandi through which they, divided by the fault line of the Cold War in Europe, could interact.<sup>18</sup> Getting to this point required negotiations in various forms and formats with inputs from official as well as non-official circles, over several years preceding the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975. While it did not involve outright grassroots groups, it was not a purely top-down process either. It involved academics and others, with relevant professional knowledge, for the progress of the overall project. A major lesson learnt from the OSCE process is the scope and delineation of the topics for discussion and negotiations: by unpacking security and dividing its content into dimensions ("baskets"), the process was credible and sustainable. The agreement was also the result of a compromise, where both sides had to accept the inclusion of each other's primary issues of interest: the Soviet Union wanted to ensure the inviolability of borders and the Western camp wanted to include human rights. In addition, what was aimed for by each party and what could subsequently be claimed as victory changed over time.

The first basket was political and military security, the second encompassed the economy and development, environment, science and technology, and the third basket focused on the human aspect: people-to-people interaction, culture and education. If the first basket addressed the most imminent forms of threat to peace, the second basket was an attempt to cement and institutionalise détente by means of regular and institutionalised interaction beyond the state. The third basket was

<sup>17</sup> For an example of such a suggestion, see Michael McFaul, "A Helsinki Process for the Middle East", in *Democracy*, No. 8 (Spring 2008), p. 19-21, <https://democracyjournal.org/?p=5664>.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the OSCE and the process of its formation, see David J. Galbreath, *The Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe*, London/New York, Routledge, 2007.

the most sensitive one as it directly addressed the political systems and the elites that control them. Discussing governance and human rights was therefore the last seed of the process to come to fruition.

In contrast to the OSCE, ASEAN was not created in a binary power arrangement, but rather by a number of individual countries on equal footing.<sup>19</sup> The countries involved, which encompassed most states in Southeast Asia, had more complicated relationships with outside powers and between themselves. In addition, most of these countries had colonial experiences which made them much more reluctant to engage in any process that might infringe on their hard-won sovereignty. There were therefore not two sides with a consensus on ideology or political leanings, but rather a grouping of states with a sense of shared values. When the declaration was signed and announced in 1967, it contained five articles that outlined the principles (the ASEAN way). Since then, legally binding milestones, such as the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, have been achieved.

In many respects, the same concepts and reference points were used in both the OSCE and ASEAN processes. Non-interference and sovereignty are prerequisites for the parties' acceptance to participate. OSCE was quicker to formalise the framework and the process, while ASEAN was slower and involved a relatively steady process of confidence-building where the emphasis was on consensus and consultation. In this regard, a similar process in the Persian Gulf will have to stress the territorial integrity, sovereignty and equality of all parties. Furthermore, informality, consensus, consultation and reciprocity are important principles of behaviour and interaction. This is not just simply because the actors are wary of each other, but also because these are aspects of human and state interaction that are crucial components of these countries' cultural self-perception. In no way should this be taken as an imputation of cultural uniqueness or exceptionalism, nor must this be abused as a defence against justified criticism of the lack of human rights or democracy in the region (see below).

The formalisation would come later, indicating that the process has achieved stability and an accepted level of confidence commonly held by all the parties involved. Engagement by and with outside actors with pre-existing security arrangements and alliances in the region must also be considered. Just as this process must be inclusive, involving all littoral states and aimed against none, it must involve and achieve buy-in from global actors such as the United States, China, the EU and Russia. They are vital to the stability of the project both as guarantors but also in order to avoid a zero-sum game spoiler scenario.

Even with deferred formalisation or institutionalisation of the overall framework, the dimensions/baskets of interest and the need to address them are clear. Progress

<sup>19</sup> For more on ASEAN and the process of its creation see, Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia. ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 2nd ed., London/New York, Routledge, 2009.

in one dimension cannot be held hostage to another, even though in the end they all depend on a common understanding of their *raison-d'être*. In this way, parties can ensure that there is traction and progress somewhere in the overall machinery. In short, it is vital to maintain momentum in the process because that is both practically and psychologically important. A tangible and valuable incentive is increased trade and economic activity between the countries involved.

While oil is an important income source for some countries in the region, not even they are comfortable with their economic prospects. Transition from either single-source commodity economics or the use of funds to buy off the population in order to avoid political reforms are not sustainable mid/long-term strategies. Thus, just like with ASEAN, economic development can act as an incentive, and interdependence, in a deeper sense, is a potential outcome of a *détente* process rather than a prerequisite for it.

We recommend a more fine-grained version of the OSCE baskets for the process of building a security framework for the Persian Gulf region:

*Security issues:* These are conventional security issues on the basis of non-aggression and non-interference principles. Here, institutionalised military-to-military communication channels, greater transparency when conducting military exercises and reaching agreement on how to ensure maritime security in the Persian Gulf are just a few first steps to building confidence. This dimension also has important domestic components, for example police cooperation against transnational crime.

*Trade and business:* The immediate need and effect of creating a more streamlined and effective foundation for trade is obvious. Here, the development of the inner market of the EU can serve as an example with some valuable lessons on how to proceed. This includes free-trade agreements, tariff-free zones and common standards and guidelines.

*Science and technology:* In this basket, education or developing health services are areas of direct benefit for people and societies of the region. They have been made all the more valuable by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which demonstrated that a state that is a hot-spot in a region can unintentionally foster the disease spread, and as a result, has to be helped. Transnational issues and problems such as environmental deterioration and water scarcity require cooperation to be solved. Epistemological communities with professional codes of conduct and best practices already exist in the region, which increases the probability of faster progress.

*Arts and culture:* It is a striking and depressing fact that the people of the region have very little contact with, or knowledge of, the countries across the fault-lines. Facilitating greater cultural exchange is an important way to increase people-to-people interaction across borders. The grassroots aspect of this is crucial: these are avenues that should be explored and built from below up.

**Governance:** While this basket is the most sensitive, that should not be a reason to avoid discussing it. Governance should, in the first instance, be understood in a bureaucratic and institutional sense. It is about becoming better at providing social services, ensuring a fair and speedy legal system, and sharing best practices and experiences. Here, citizen and minority rights are sensitive but unavoidable topics. Too often, human rights are reduced to political rights at the expense of other aspects of human life and security. Importantly though, work on this dimension should not be front-loaded with the thorniest issues first: trust needs to be built first, and the overall process needs to acquire sufficient momentum and stability to withstand backlashes and shocks.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In this paper, we have put our own work into the context of both the format as well as the process of facilitating dialogue and interaction on various levels. The format spans from Track 2 workshops to more grassroots-oriented attempts to build professional or epistemological communities. This requires finding topics as well as “languages” that are held in common and allow for a dialogue that is more limited in scope and can overcome political fissures and conflicts. While Track 2 dialogues tend to be more policy-oriented, they should not solely hinge on being able to feed ideas “upwards” but also connect to concrete, implementable projects “below” – acting as a catalyst both vertically and horizontally. This, in turn, speaks to conceptualisation: how the starting point is defined and whether it is the process itself or the end goal that matters. Track 2s require time; as a result, a long-term commitment to maintaining the process is vital. But it may also be that the end goal is not as crucial as the transformative role of the road travelled together.

Within the overall aim of creating a safer region and a sustainable peace, it is important to enunciate a cardinal rule: redundancy. The fallacy of reading history backwards is particularly apt for an institutionalised success like OSCE: it is easy to think that all the various events and efforts naturally flowed together to bring about an inevitable détente. That would be a grave misreading of history and politics and the role that contingency plays in both of them. Rather, it is important to maintain a plethora of projects, methods, participants and audiences, and to maintain their forward momentum at all times. This will ensure that different ideas, methods and goals are pursued, and all are pursued continuously, without the success of one being dependant on the other. Such “build-on” trends may seem reassuring at first, but in reality they only point to a dearth of opportunity and resources to try different approaches, and increase the instability of the overall endeavour, as the flaws of one approach are reproduced in all others. This in turn empowers the potential spoilers to derail the overall goal.

*Updated 26 October 2020*

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

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