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Creating Building Blocks for Cooperative Security in the Middle East

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SYNOPSIS

A failure to agree on a revival of the 2015 international Iran nuclear agreement that would recommit the United States and Iran to the deal threatens prospects for greater security and stability in the Middle East and risks igniting a missile and a nuclear arms race.

COMMENTARY

Fading hopes for a revival of the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear programme potentially puts one more nail in the coffin of a regional security architecture that targets rather than includes the Islamic republic.

The potential demise of the agreement, coupled with America redefining its commitment to Middle Eastern security as it concentrates on rivalry with Russia and China, spotlights the need for a regional security forum that would facilitate confidence-building measures, including common approaches to transnational threats such as climate change, food security, maritime security, migration, and public health.

From Unilateralism to Multilateralism

Mitigating in favour of a firmer grounding of the reduction of regional tension is the fact that it is driven not only by economic factors such as the economic transition in the Gulf and the economic crisis in Turkey, Iran, and Egypt but also by big-power geopolitics.

China and Russia have spelled out that they would entertain the possibility of greater engagement in regional security if Middle Eastern players take greater responsibility for managing regional conflicts, reducing tensions, and their own defence.

Rhetoric aside, that is not different from what the United States, the provider of the Middle East's security umbrella, has been trying to do in the Biden administration's attempts to rejigger its commitment to security in the Gulf.

In addition to the emerging, albeit tentative, macro-level big power consensus on a more inclusive, multilateral approach, efforts by the major regional powers – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Israel, and Iran – to reduce tensions and put relations on a more even keel, contribute to an environment potentially conducive to discussion of a more broad-based security architecture.

The need to focus on conflict prevention and improved communication between regional rivals alongside more robust defence cooperation is evident irrespective of whether the Iran nuclear accord is brought back from the dead, given that the covert war between Israel and Iran will continue no matter what happens.

Israeli officials this month warned that their airstrike against Aleppo's airport was a warning to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that his country's air transport infrastructure would be at risk if he continues to allow "planes whose purpose is to encourage terrorism to land," a reference to flights operated on behalf of the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards.

Iran Remains a Target

Even so, the Biden administration remains focused on broadening responsibility for a regional security architecture that targets Iran rather than an inclusive structure that would give all parties a stake, seek to address root problems, and stymie an evolving arms race.

The administration has encouraged security cooperation between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain (two Arab states that two years ago established diplomatic relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords), as well as with Saudi Arabia, which has changed its long-standing hostile attitudes towards the Jewish state but refuses to formalise relations in the absence of a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

The year's move of Israel from the US military's European to its Central Command (CENTCOM) that covers the Middle East facilitates coordination between regional militaries. In a first, Israel this year participated in a US-led naval exercise alongside Saudi Arabia, Oman, Comoros, Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan; countries with which it has no diplomatic relations, as well as the UAE and Bahrain.

A Limited Regional Alliance

In March, top military officers from Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt met in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss the contours of potential military cooperation.

Similarly, the US, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia are attempting to create a regional air defence alliance. In June, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz claimed the partnership had already thwarted Iranian attacks.

Similarly, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel are working on a fleet of naval drones to monitor Persian Gulf waters and to ward off Iranian threats.

Furthermore, CENTCOM plans to open a testing facility in Saudi Arabia to develop and assess integrated air and missile defence capabilities.

Introducing Cooperative Security

American scholar Dalia Dassa Kaye argues that focusing on confidence-building aspects of cooperative security involving a dialogue that aims to find common ground to prevent or mitigate conflict rather than collective security that seeks to counter a specific threat is one way of breaking the Middle East's vicious circle.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has a patchwork of political/security processes and structures between external powers and individual association members, and inclusive regional forums that demonstrate that the two security approaches are not mutually exclusive.

The ASEAN model also suggests that, at least initially, a less centralised and institutionalised approach may be the best way to kickstart moves towards regional cooperative security in the Middle East.

Negotiating an agreement on principles guiding regional conduct on the back of exchanges between scholars, experts, and analysts, as well as informal, unofficial encounters of officials, could be a first step.

A Tall Order

To be sure, Iran's refusal to recognize Israel and Tehran’s perceived goal of destroying the Jewish state likely constitute the foremost obstacle to initiating an inclusive, cooperative security process.

The carrot for Iran will have to be credible assurances that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel will not pursue regime change in Tehran and recognize that Iran's security concerns are as legitimate as those of others in the region. However, even that could prove to be a tall order, particularly if the negotiations to revive the nuclear accord fail.

Nevertheless, that may be the only realistic way of putting Iran's support for militants in various Arab countries, including Lebanon's Hezbollah Shiite militia, various pro-Iranian paramilitary groups in Iraq, and Houthi rebels in Yemen, as well as the Islamic republic's ballistic missiles programme on an agenda to which Iran is a participating party.

Dalia Dassa Kaye argues that "despite these serious obstacles, it is important to present a vision and pathway for an inclusive, cooperative process when a political opening emerges, or when a crisis erupts of such severe magnitude that even bitter adversaries may consider options that were previously unthinkable."

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