



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 5
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Maritime Security and the Gulf States: Changing Strategies, New Political Rationales

Workshop Directors:

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Abstract

The Gulf countries (GCC countries, Iran, Iraq and Yemen) are surrounded by vital waters: the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Strait of Hormuz, Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. All the Gulf countries boast seaports and have access to the seas. About 90% of Gulf population and 95% of its GDP are along the coastal areas. The world economy and energy supply hinge on Gulf water channels too. A third of the world's liquefied natural gas and almost 25% of total global oil

consumption passes through the Strait of Hormuz, making it a highly important strategic location for international trade. Approximately 11% of the world's seaborne petroleum passes through the Gulf of Aden on its way to the Suez Canal or to regional refineries.

These basic facts are fairly well-known, but their significance at any time is determined by local political conditions and the changing strategies of external powers. Currently substantial changes are taking place in the dynamics of the regimes in the Gulf region, to the extent that in some cases the state itself has been transformed – with radical changes in the domestic power balance, and radical changes in the conduct of both domestic and external policies. At the same time external powers are adapting their strategies towards the Gulf region, with the US apparently eager to limit its commitment, while some others seek either to boost their security presence or else develop new frameworks within which the security of the maritime routes can be maintained. The complexity and unpredictability of developments, and perhaps the dangers inherent in them, are further enhanced by the disintegration of previous frameworks of regional order in the wider Middle East, leaving the region more penetrated by external interests than ever.

This workshop, then, is intended to bring together a number of different levels of analysis – the nature of the changing state in the Gulf region, the impact of this on the regional strategies pursued by Gulf governments, and the evolving strategies pursued by external powers – in order to understand what the future may hold for the maritime security of the Gulf region.

The history of maritime security in the Gulf region reveals four key dimensions where conflicts of interest arise. First, there is the maritime rivalry among the Gulf countries. The Gulf waters have often been a battleground for geopolitical rivalry and geo-economic competition among regional countries. In the “tanker wars” of the 1980s, for instance, the US and other powers’ navies escorted commercial vessels from Kuwait traversing the Strait of Hormuz to prevent attacks on tankers by Iraq and Iran. In recent years, the Iran-Saudi naval arms race, the Qatari discord with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among others, have aggravated zero-sum game on the sea. After Yemen civil war escalated, the adjacent vessels are frequently threatened by warring factions. In 2019, several mysterious attacks on tankers happened near the Strait of Hormuz, causing serious mistrust between Iran and the GCC countries. Tensions escalated in July 2019 again when Iran impounded a British-flagged tanker with its 23 crew aboard as it passed through the Strait.

Second, there is the maritime competition between the local countries and the outside powers, and perhaps among the outside powers themselves. The US, France, Britain and Turkey all now maintain naval bases in the Gulf region; the Japanese, Chinese, American, French, Russian, Turkish, Saudi, Qatari, UAE and Israeli navies have established military presences in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Thus the originally local and bilateral maritime conflicts are now increasingly militarized and multi-lateralized. The 33-nation Combined Maritime

Forces, based in Bahrain and under U.S. command is already there; Combined Joint Force 152 consists of navies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, the U.K., the US, France, Australia and Italy. In 2019, after US-Iran maritime disputes escalated, the US proposed to build an “international maritime security mission” to protect merchant vessels in the Strait of Hormuz

The third dimension is the non-traditional threat to the maritime security in the Gulf and the Red Sea. ISIS, Al-Qaeda and their affiliates are trying to connect the Arabian Peninsula with the Horn of Africa, creating a “triangle of terror” across the Red Sea. Pirates in the Gulf of Aden and Somali coast are still posing a potential threat to vessels. Illegal immigration, unlawful fishery and ecological degradation all pose serious threats. These will not only exert impact on regional politics, but also on world trade, energy supply and oil price.

The fourth is the civil projects in the coastal areas which have an impact on Gulf maritime security. The Gulf countries have launched a series of civil projects along their coastal areas which may impair their maritime security in the long run. The nuclear power plants, under either construction or negotiation in the Gulf may pose a potential threat to its surrounding areas; the commercial seaports constructed by outside powers may cause competition, such as Chinese seaport constructions in Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Djibouti and Israel have aroused the US anxiety; the island developments, industrial (high-tech) parks, free-trade areas, urbanization, etc, may be connected to maritime security as well.

These four dimensions are all of relevance when pursuing the three different levels of analysis discussed earlier. They are all impacted by, and have effects on, the nature of the changing state in the Gulf region, the regional strategies pursued by Gulf governments, and the evolving strategies of external powers.

Description and Rationale

Objectives and Scope

The workshop will offer a unique opportunity for Gulf scholars from different backgrounds to reflect on and discuss among themselves the changing nature of the state in the Gulf region and what this means for the maritime security of the Gulf region. It is hoped that this will create opportunities to propose mechanisms for trust-building and crisis-prevention in the Gulf and the Red Sea.

The directors of the workshop have considerable experience of Gulf affairs. Three of the directors of this workshop have together directed four GRM workshops in the past, which have ventured into new areas of Gulf studies such as ties with BRICS, the Indian Ocean, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Gulf peace initiatives.

Contribution to the Gulf Studies

Anticipated Participants

The workshop will seek to attract senior scholars of the Gulf, practitioners with interests in the region, and younger researchers. It is hoped that the combination will lead to the discussion of out-of-the-box ideas to address the challenges which lie ahead for the region. The workshop will seek perspectives from as wide range of geographical scope as possible, particularly from countries that have a major stake in Gulf security. These, among others, would include:

- (a) **the Middle East:** GCC countries, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Iraq and other Middle East countries
- (b) **Asia:** India, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Pakistan
- (c) **Europe:** Britain, Russia, Germany, France, Italy and other European countries
- (d) **The Americas:** the US, Canada, Brazil, Mexico
- (e) **Africa:** Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia

There is a wide range of topics which are within the scope of interests of this workshop. Some would relate to the wide issues impinging on the workshop's central focus:

- The changing nature of the state in the Gulf region, and the implications of this for the regional strategies pursued (separate studies for each of the main regional players)
- The evolving strategies of external powers in the region, and their implications for maritime security
- Threats to maritime security emerging from regional rivalry
- Threats to maritime security stemming from wider Middle Eastern regional rivalries and conflicts

Others may relate to specific aspects of ongoing maritime strategy and security, such as:

- The Gulf countries' naval build-up and military balance
- The freedom of navigation and the energy shipping line security in the Gulf
- The threats to oil tankers in the Gulf and crisis prevention
- Island and maritime disputes among the Gulf countries
- The regional conflicts (Yemen civil war, Somali issue, Iranian nuclear issue) and their impact on the Gulf maritime security
- Implications of the US, French, British and Turkish naval bases in the Gulf; the Japanese, Chinese, American, French, Russian, Turkish, Saudi, Qatari, UAE and Israeli naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea

- The impact of the 33-nation Combined Maritime Forces, based in Bahrain and under U.S. command
- The US-led international maritime security mission for escorting vessels and its impact
- The international missions of anti-piracy in the Gulf of Aden
- Maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal seaborne immigrations and other forms of transnational crime across the Gulf and the Red Sea
- The complex maritime security proposals by the Gulf countries and outside powers
- The maritime code of conduct and rule of law in the Gulf and the Red Sea
- The UN, the League of Arab States, GCC and their maritime peace proposals.
- The impact of foreign presence on the state institutions and statehood in the Gulf
- The maritime rivalry among Gulf countries and its impact on their domestic politics and nation building
- Ecological degradation, illegal fishery and their impact on the Gulf maritime security
- Nuclear power plants, seaport development, urbanization and their impact on the Gulf maritime security

Workshop Director Profiles

Amb. Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974. Early in his career, he was posted in a number of West Asian countries such as Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen and later, between 1987-90, he was Consul General in Jeddah. He also held positions in the Indian missions in New York, London and Pretoria. He was head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000.

He served as Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia twice (2000-03; 2010-11); Oman (2003-04), and the UAE (2007-10). He was also Additional Secretary for International Cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06, and Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, in 2006-07. In July 2011, the Saudi Government conferred on him the King Abdul Aziz Medal First Class for his contribution to the promotion of Indo – Saudi relations.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he worked in the corporate sector in Dubai for four years. He is now a full-time academic and holds the Ram Sathe Chair in International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune.

He has published three books: *Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates* (2005), *Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms* (2010) and *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring* (2013). Many of his papers have been published in academic journals and in books. He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on political Islam, the politics of West Asia and the Indian Ocean, and energy security issues.

Professor Tim Niblock is Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He is also currently Visiting Professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing. He has held the position of Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies (2009-2014), Vice-Chair of the UK Council of Area Studies Associations (2010-2014), and Vice-President of the British Society for Middle East Studies (2009-2012). He was the founding Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He has previously served at the University of Khartoum, the University of Reading, and the University of Durham. Among his published books are: *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun, 2018); *Conflict Resolution and the Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun); *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Yang Guang, 2014); *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (2007), *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (2006); *'Pariah States' and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya and Sudan* (2001); *Class and Power in Sudan* (1987); *Iraq: the Contemporary State* (edited, 1982); *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (edited, 1981); and *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf* (edited, 1980).

Prof. Degang Sun is Professor and Deputy Director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, China. He was an academic visitor to Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (2018-2019), the Middle East Centre, Oxford University, and Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013). His research interest is China's Middle East Policy, international relations in the Middle East. His most recent works are: *Diplomacy of Quasi-alliance in the Middle East* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2019); "China's Response to the Revolts in the Arab World: A Case of Pragmatic Diplomacy," (*Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2014, with Professor Yahia Zoubir); and "China's Economic Diplomacy towards the Arab Countries: Challenges Ahead?" (*Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, with Prof. Yahia Zoubir).

Selected Readings

It is hoped that contributors will take note of the series of Gerlach publications which have emerged from earlier Gulf Research Meetings on Gulf relations with the external world (especially those with Asian and African countries). The three conveners have contributed substantively to these works. The publications are:

Shelala II, Robert M., and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Maritime Security in Middle East and North Africa*, Washington D.C.: CSIS, 2014.

Abusharaf, R.M., and Dale Eickelman (eds), *Africa and the Gulf Region: Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Ties*. Berlin: Gerlach, 2015.

Ahmad, Talmiz, "Shaping a Peace Process for the Gulf: An Indian Initiative to Realise the Ideas of Westphalia," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2019.

Gerges, Fawaz A., *The New middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Gupta, R, Abubaker Bagader, Talmiz Ahmad, and N.Janardhan (eds), *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role*. Berlin:

Gerlach (2014).

Hook, S, and Tim Niblock (eds), *The United States and the Gulf*. Berlin: Gerlach (2015).

Niblock, T (ed), with Monica Malik, *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century*. Berlin and London: Gerlach (2012).

Niblock, T (ed), with Yang Guang, *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region*. Berlin: Gerlach (2013).

Niblock, T, with Sun Degang and Alejandra Galindo (eds), *The Arab States of the Gulf and BRICS*. Berlin: Gerlach, 2016.

Niblock, T, with Talmiz Ahmad and Sun Degang (eds), *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2017.

Niblock, Tim, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (Eds.), *The Gulf States and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2018. Sun, Degang, with Dandan Zhang, *Diplomacy of Quasi-alliance in the Middle East*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2019.