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GCC's DEFENSE COOPERATION: MOVING TOWARDS UNITY

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For more than 30 years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has attempted to establish a collective defense regime to protect its six members: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This ambition was expressed through a number of initiatives, beginning with the foundation of the Peninsula Shield force in 1982 and culminating in the establishment of a Unified Military Command in 2013. This latter decision represents an important reform and could be considered a crucial step in the evolution of the GCC towards deep regional integration, especially on the military side. A Unified Military Command can benefit from the various weapons systems in the Gulf, and create a new generation of Gulf officers, who take advantage of the broad similarities of the military systems and experiences of the GCC countries. In the light of the historical background of the GCC's defense cooperation, this article aims to analyze the strategic opportunities that could be generated by the foundation of the unified military command and to explain the political challenges that could hamper the GCC countries' attempt to evolve towards a real military alliance.

INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS TO IMPROVE MILITARY COOPERATION

Following the new regional order generated by the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 and Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Arab Gulf countries decided in 1981 to create a regional organization called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in order to create and maintain a sense of regional integration as well as to achieve interdependence in all fields of cooperation. Although defense and security issues were not clearly mentioned in the founding treaty¹, the final communiqué issued after the first GCC summit in May 1981 affirmed the conviction of its members about the connected nature of their security and the necessity to coordinate their policies in this domain. Since then, in a series of meetings between chiefs of staff and defense ministers of the Gulf States, the GCC has proposed a wide range of agreements and useful projects to improve military cooperation and collective self-defense capabilities.

In 1982 the GCC defense ministers agreed on the creation of a two-brigade Peninsula Shield Force (PSF).² This move was "one of the oldest decisions in the field of military cooperation."³ The force, which is based in Saudi

¹ The GCC's Charter is available at: <http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/indexfc7a.html?action=Sec-Show&ID=1> (accessed July 17, 2014).

² This Force was officially created in 1982, but it became operational starting 1984.

³ See GCC website: <http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/index8409.html?action=Sec-Show&ID=49> (accessed August 13, 2014)

Arabia near King Khalid Military City at Hafar al Batin and commanded by a Saudi officer, currently consists of a Saudi brigade and a composite brigade made up of about 10,000 personnel contributed by other GCC member states. Over the years, the modernization of PSF has continued developing more mechanized infantry with full fire and fighting logistics. Although its mission is not clearly publicly defined, the PSF is intended to be activated in response to threats to the territorial integrity of the GCC states and would have the authority to intervene in cases of internal unrest as well. Its performance in specific cases has demonstrated that the PSF still has limited military capabilities. The occupation of Kuwait by Iraqi forces in 1990 was the first real challenge the PSF confronted (but it was inadequate for any serious response to this aggression).⁴ The second test for the PSF was the popular uprising in Bahrain in the wake of the Arab Spring. Bahrain requested the deployment of the PSF as part of the mutual engagement guaranteed by the GCC Charter to insure its integrity and territorial borders.⁵ The PSF was not engaged in any direct confrontations with Bahraini civilians, and its intervention was limited to provide assistance to the Bahrain Defense Force to secure key infrastructure and installations in the country.

In December 2000, the GCC concluded the Joint Defense Agreement, which was considered the second most significant achievement in field of military cooperation after the establishment of the PSF. This agreement provided a framework for collective defense based on the concept that an attack on any member State meant an attack against all of them. On this subject, the agreement obliged all six states to provide military assistance to help each other. It also established a Joint Defense Council and a Military Committee to supervise cooperation, and promote collaboration in joint military exercises and coordination in military industries. The move is seen as a sign that the states are looking to build an integrated defense structure after years of prevarication and delay, instead of remaining dependent on the U.S. and other Western forces for protection.⁶

NEW MOMENTUM: UNIFIED MILITARY COMMAND

The ambition to provide the GCC with credible military capabilities has been reinforced by the decision taken during the 34th GCC's Summit - held in Kuwait City on December 10-11 2013 - to set up a unified military command structure. This command will have a force of around 100,000, half of which would be contributed by Saudi Arabia, the main advocate of this initiative. This indicates that GCC members are coordinating air, land, and marine forces under one common structure. Progress towards a fully integrated defense system could allow the GCC to become a real military alliance along the lines of NATO. But this can only effectively work if there is a certain level of interoperability to ensure smooth cooperation and the ability of different national forces of each member to conduct joint operations. So, the primary tasks of the GCC command is to see how to develop interoperability tailored to the key missions necessary to meet the security needs of all the GCC countries. This is complicated on the one hand because the countries preserve sovereign decision making authority, and on the other, because their armed forces have a very diverse mix of equipment, command and control systems, munitions, support facilities, and power projection capabilities. In the past, this regional organization has tried to develop different initiatives to advance common defense priorities, but with little regard for developing truly effective, interoperable forces or a common doctrine and organization.⁷ To overcome those historical shortcomings, the GCC's unified military command requires a certain minimum standard of training and education. The GCC armed forces also still face great challenges relative to their performance and professionalism. They do not have extensive combat experience, in contrast to other regional militaries such as those of Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Iran. An example of this can be seen during NATO's military intervention in Libya. The Gulf states offered support, but their actions revealed that states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) still have limited power projection capabilities and remain critically dependent on Western logistical support.

In addition, in order to ensure its viability, a unified GCC command is needed to modernize procurement policy and develop a common armaments programs. The most apparent problem in the GCC is that its members have procured major platforms and weapons systems without regard to interoperability. This prevents them from transforming their spending or their arms imports into forces whose effectiveness would be proportionate to their

⁴ Malcolm C. Peck, *Historical Dictionary of the Gulf Arab States*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008, p.113.

⁵ Silvia Colombo, "The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 47:4, 2012, p. 116

⁶ Jane's Defence Weekly, April 12, 2001.

⁷ Y. Guzansky, "Defence Cooperation in the Arabian Gulf: The Peninsula Shield Force Put to the Test," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50:4, 2014, p. 644.

cost. In practice, their weapons systems are Western with great dependence on U.S., British and French power projection, but some are Russian. For that reason, the main task of this command is to help to build the right defense partnerships for the future aimed at providing direction, control, co-ordination, support and assessment of military cooperation activities across the Arabian Gulf. The GCC needs to establish a much clearer base for mid and long-term planning regarding the involvement of different actors in bilateral or multilateral military partnership.

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

The GCC as a regional organization has tried to develop different initiatives to advance common defense priorities. These initiatives should be assessed and judged on their utility vis-à-vis regional security, and to ensure that each nation in the Arabian Gulf could benefit from creating more interoperable forces. Despite the large wealth of its members, however, the GCC's efforts over the past three decades still have not guaranteed deterrence and security against external threats, even as the number of those threats have grown. The GCC states have spent tens of billions of dollars on upgrading their defense, particularly their air forces, since the 1990-91 Gulf War. However, the Gulf wars demonstrated that despite massive arms procurement, the Gulf states cannot defend themselves. They still rely heavily on the United States and the European Union for their security. The GCC failed to guarantee security to its members due to the absence of a real military integration, which has led the GCC member states to seek other security options provided by external powers through bilateral security agreements.

The little progress accomplished by the GCC in the field of military integration was basically due to the reluctance of several GCC states to work together, in particular because of their starkly contrasting political perceptions. They agree about security and defense pacts with the Western countries, but have been unable to reconcile their regional and individual interests. Indeed, a common threat perception still does not exist among the GCC states, a fact that has significant implications for effective defense cooperation. The effectiveness of all initiatives and projects in this military sphere are of course conditioned by political factors rather than purely military considerations. In this regard, the GCC countries will need to continue its difficult efforts to bridge conflicting political interests, and to reduce the political rivalries that have constituted a barrier to vital cooperation.

(You can access the complete E-Book on which this summary is based [here.](#))