

## Europe's Role in the Gulf: A Transatlantic Perspective

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What political and security role could Europe play in the Gulf? This is certainly not a new question. And the response that the role, if any, is bound to be limited is not new either. However, the Greater Middle East policy pursued by the current US administration, the crisis it has triggered in Iraq, and the repercussions of that crisis on Iraq's neighbours – obviously including the countries on the Gulf's shores – have once again put forward the question and call for new attempts to answer it. In this context, what is new is that voices are being heard in Europe demanding that Europe's role in the Gulf be enhanced and enlarged. These voices come from both the capitals and the European Union (EU). The latter has endorsed an "EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East".<sup>1</sup> This document illustrates the EU members' apparent willingness to expand the

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<sup>1</sup> "The EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East", *EuroMed Report*, no. 78, 23 June 2004.

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EU's Southern policies away from their traditional focus on the Mediterranean so as to include the Gulf. In sum, the question is worth picking up again.

As is well known, the Gulf is a region whose security is influenced by long-standing conflicts and complex factors. Domestic and structural factors affecting internal stability are especially important for the Arab Gulf countries, less so for Iran. A good number of sectarian and ethnic fault-lines acting on domestic stability link up with regional instability with serious effects. The balance of power between the major players of the region is unstable and includes structural asymmetries and geopolitical paradoxes. Pollack, for instance, notes that "any Iraq that is strong enough to balance and contain Iran will inevitably be capable of overrunning Kuwait and Saudi Arabia".<sup>2</sup> One could add that any understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran would alert Iraq and the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and so forth.

In this difficult arena, the United States is the only external power today that concretely influences the security, the policies and the objectives of the regional players. There can be no doubt – not even among Europeans – that Europe is not a player in the region when it comes to security or at most only a minor player. A few major European powers, such as the UK, France and Germany play a limited role. However, as pointed out by Gause,<sup>3</sup> while Europe is definitely an important economic partner for the countries of the region, it cannot constitute a significant strategic or security partner as well.

This is not to say that Europe's role cannot be enhanced, in fulfilment of its apparently emerging aspirations. This role must, however, take the United States into account. Thus, a possible European role in the Gulf needs to be considered in a transatlantic perspective. There is room for an autonomous role, however, respective interests, perceptions and, most of all, approaches would have to be harmonised. This harmony, as attested to by current events, cannot be taken for granted. Different situations or scenarios can be worked out according to different patterns of transatlantic solidarity and different European roles in the Gulf. In this article, three such scenarios are set out:

<sup>2</sup> K. M. Pollack, "Securing the Gulf", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 4, July-August 2003, pp. 2-16.

<sup>3</sup> F. G. Gause III, "The Gulf and US-EU Relations" in Koch, C. (ed.), *Unfulfilled Potential: Exploring the GCC-EU Relationship* (Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Gulf Research Center, January 2004) pp. 73-82.

- A scenario of weak strategic convergence, as prevails today in transatlantic relations;
- A scenario with some transatlantic cooperation, as in the case of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), set up in July 2004 with a view to strengthening partnership and security cooperation between NATO nations and those in the Gulf Cooperation Council;
- A scenario in which transatlantic relations in the Gulf are characterised by some degree of enhanced EU presence in the Gulf region.

### **Europe and the United States in the Gulf after the Cold War**

Discussion of the three scenarios mentioned above requires a brief summary of past developments in US-Europe relations.

In 1990-91, the administration of George Bush Senior set up a very "benign" coalition, within the framework of a full UN mandate, to roll back Iraq from Kuwait. Subsequently, the US "dual containment" strategy with its sanctions, particularly on Iraq, raised doubts and opposition in Europe and, while many Americans advocated a continued US-European coalition there, if not the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance to the Gulf, what survived the heyday of 1990-91 was a US-British coalition. In 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, the administration of George Bush Junior unleashed a war on terrorism from a rather unilateralist platform. The administration rejected the activation of NATO Art. 5 which allies offered immediately after the attack. The US went to war in Afghanistan alone and only subsequently accepted limited NATO participation in operations.

When the same administration decided to invade Iraq with a view to toppling Saddam's "Republic of Fears"<sup>4</sup> on the basis of an extremist and unconvincing "pre-emptive" agenda, it was unable to garner international consensus. It nevertheless went ahead aggressively, declaring "either with us or against us". This platform excluded, by definition, a partnership or alliance, including with the Atlantic Alliance. It created unprecedented divisions with the European allies – and within the Union – namely between those willing to support the United States for their own domestic purposes and those plainly in disagreement with the initiative. Consequently, the United States acted by means of another coalition of states. Subsequently, the negative evolution in post-war Iraq and the region made the US

<sup>4</sup> This is the title of the famous book by Kanan Makiya, University of California Press, 1998 (originally published in 1989 under the pseudonym of Samir al-Khalil).

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administration attenuate its unilateralism. In fact, the Atlantic Alliance, made a modest come back by setting up the ICI. In any case, whether in Afghanistan or in the Gulf (with the ICI), NATO is employed on the margins of US initiatives, less as an alliance proper than as coalition support.

In general, trends in US-European relations in the Gulf have very aptly reflected the difficulties the transatlantic relationship has faced since the end of the Cold War. While the interests of the United States have shifted heavily towards the Gulf since the end of confrontation with the Soviet Union, the Euro-American military alliance has failed to expand to that area. If and when Americans and Europeans have cooperated militarily in the Gulf, this has been by means of *ad hoc* coalitions, excluding the Alliance. And since *ad hoc* coalitions have prevailed, the Europeans have from a political point of view acted more as junior – to be generous – than as full partners.

A way out of this predicament could be an expansion of NATO commitments to the Gulf. In the 1990s, RAND produced a number of reports – some of them solicited by Southern European governments – arguing that, if the Europeans wished to revitalise NATO and their transatlantic relationship, they had to ensure a more global orientation for the Alliance by joining US efforts in the Gulf.<sup>5</sup> This would prevent Europe from becoming irrelevant to the United States and NATO from being confined to European regional security. It would give the transatlantic bond a more global flavour and allow it to play a pivotal role once again. More or less the same argument, although encased in an updated perspective (essentially, the joint transatlantic urgency to promote democracy), has been put forward again since the crisis in transatlantic relations triggered by the intervention on Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

Why have these calls coming from America-friendly voices – as interested in transatlantic values as in moderating American unilateralism –

<sup>5</sup> R. D. Asmus, R. L. Kugler, F. S. Larrabee "Building a New NATO", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 4, Sept.-Oct. 1993, pp. 28-40; R. D. Asmus, R. D. Blackwill, F. S. Larrabee, "Can Nato Survive?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, Spring 1996, pp. 79-101; D. C. Gompert, F. S. Larrabee (eds), *America and Europe. A Partnership for A New Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 191-217; F. S. Larrabee, J. Green, I. O. Lesser, M. Zanini, *NATO's Mediterranean Initiative: Policy Issues and Dilemmas* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1998); I. O. Lesser, J. D. Green, F. S. Larrabee, M. Zanini, *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative. Evolution and Next Steps* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> See R. A. Asmus, L. Diamond, M. Leonard, and M. McFaul, "A Transatlantic Strategy to Promote Democratic Development in the Broader Middle East", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 7-21.

gone unheeded? Two explanations seem to be more relevant than others. First, the European countries, while united in their national security approaches and policies towards European security, have different views and objectives when it comes to other areas and global issues. So, while they have rather homogeneous policies and visions as long as the alliances they belong to – EU, NATO, OSCE – deal with European regional challenges, they differ as soon as these alliances tackle global issues or areas lying outside of Europe. The result is that, while individual countries (such as the UK, Italy, Estonia, Poland, etc.) may be responsive nationally to the calls mentioned above, as members of NATO, they may not necessarily be so.

Second, as divided as European countries may be, there are strong strategic views on the Middle East that unite them, independently of alliances and national security policies. Apart from their contingent national interest, even the European countries participating in the Iraq coalition today converge on these views. This intra-European strategic convergence has engendered a long-standing divergence with the United States on the Middle East. Given these constraints, a closer look has to be taken at the three scenarios outlined earlier.

### **US and Europe in the Gulf: weak strategic convergence**

The Middle East and the Mediterranean have never been favourable to strong transatlantic convergence. There was a strict strategic convergence during the Cold War but, starting with the rise of Islamism and the first wave of terrorism in the 1980s, convergence eroded. Today, there is broad convergence on the significance of a set of strategic trends and challenges, such as weapons of mass proliferation (WMD) proliferation, terrorism and failed states, much less so, however, on their nature (whether they are risks or threats), their reach and significance, their inter-linkage and respective priority and, of course, on how to deal with them. This means differences, even divergence. It must be pointed out, however, that these differences are firmly contained by the "community" of shared values and a multitude of transactions between the civil societies on the two shores of the North Atlantic – perhaps the most important such community in the world. Moreover, the Atlantic community is strongly institutionalised. Its "community" nature makes the Atlantic Alliance work even at a time when its rationale is less rooted in strategic realities than it used to be during the East-West confrontation. So, at the end of the day, divergence is there, but it is kept at bay.

Against this backdrop, two main differences can be discerned with respect to the Middle East and the Mediterranean (to use the "European"

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concept) or the Greater Middle East (to use the current American geopolitical vision), one concerns the old issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and another the new strategy towards the Middle East pursued by the present US administration. These two differences make for the first scenario of "weak strategic convergence".

**The Israeli-Palestinian crisis.** In a strategic perspective, the Europeans have always believed and continue to believe that solving this crisis, abiding by international law, remains the central tenet of the region's normalisation and pacification. Despite the compromise reached in the wording of the documents at the mid-2004 meetings at Sea Island (G-8) and Dromoland Castle (the annual US-EU gathering), the Europeans do not believe that political normalisation in the region – be it democratic or not – can take place independently of a solution to the outstanding regional crises, in particular the Palestinian one.<sup>7</sup> While the US strategy is to focus on democratisation, in the sense that democracy can pave the way for normalisation, the Europeans are not sure that this will suffice – nor do they believe that solving the crisis is a preliminary condition for democratisation to start (all these being but "heroic" sequences, of course). In fact, it should be noted that, in the "European Security Strategy" endorsed by the EU at the end of 2003,<sup>8</sup> security challenges stemming from the Mediterranean and the Middle East are less related to terrorism than to regional conflicts, in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In addition to this fundamental difference, the Europeans are concerned about the political viability of the Palestinian state which could emerge. If the entire Palestinian state were shaped as unilaterally as Gaza and its ultimate form in the West Bank determined by the "Wall" and the closing ring of settlements around Jerusalem, Europeans feel this would generate further and lasting conflict in Palestine, while continuing to send shock waves throughout the region.

<sup>7</sup> The compromise is reflected in the following statement of the G-8 final declaration: "The resolution of ... the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an important element of progress in the region. At the same time, regional conflicts must not be an obstacle for reforms. Indeed, reforms may make a significant contribution towards resolving them"; this formula eliminates the need to establish a definite priority.

<sup>8</sup> *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

**The fight against terrorism and democratisation.** As said, the subject of terrorism has always brought to the fore differences between the United States and Europe, first in the Palestinian-Israeli context, then in the first wave of terrorism unleashed in the 1980s by the then emerging radical Islamism and the post-Egyptian-Israeli-peace Arab-Muslim rejectionism. The difference concerned and still concerns the need to pay more attention to terrorism's political background and social consensus. The US administration's upgrading of terrorism to the level of an existential threat to Western security after the 11 September attacks has magnified transatlantic differences not only on terrorism but in a broader strategic perspective.

First, the Europeans do not agree to bringing all kinds of terrorism together under one label: Hamas, the Chechens, ETA, the Jihad and al-Qaeda. Terrorism is a scourge, there is no question about that. However, in order to understand its rationale and be able to fight it, one has to make distinctions rather than generalisations. Second, it is very clear that Europe does not see terrorism as an existential threat. Even the most large-scale attacks in Europe (the stations in Madrid and London) have not been perceived as existential threats. Nobody in Europe doubts that terrorism is a terrible bane and a fearful threat, but few see it in a strategic perspective.

This difference in assessment of the strategic importance of terrorism reflects on democracy promotion policies. In the US policy towards the Greater Middle East, democratisation as a response to terrorism is based on a pessimistic cultural assessment of the societies concerned (a swamp to be drained). In the European view, democracy promotion plays a pivotal role in the Mediterranean and the Middle East (in particular since the inception of the Barcelona process), but it is regarded as a long-term transformation requiring a number of cooperative responses on both sides (a process in achieving so-called "structural stability"<sup>9</sup>). Moreover, democratisation in the European perspective might require peace operations and coercion in an international legal framework, but would never contemplate the use of military force, as in Iraq.

The strategic vision of the current US administration<sup>10</sup> – terrorism as an existential threat, preventive intervention, scarce international legality,

<sup>9</sup> For the concept of "structural stability" see, *Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building: A Practical Guide* (Berlin: SWP-CPN, December 2001) and "Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention", COM (2001)211 fin., Brussels, 11 April 2001.

<sup>10</sup> On the US strategic doctrine and its political implications, see L. Korb and M. Kraig, "US Strategies for National Security. Winning the Peace in the 21st Century, A Task Force Report of the Strategies for the US National Security Program", The Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, Iowa, October 2003. <<http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/reports/SNS03.pdf>>

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forced changes in other countries – has for the first time gone beyond the usual divergence, creating a transatlantic fault line. This is reflected in the split over Iraq: while a few European governments joined the US coalition for specific national reasons (national security for the Baltic countries and to a lesser extent for Eastern European countries; ideological and domestic political reasons for Aznar and Berlusconi; a traditional tenet of post-imperial British foreign policy for Blair), European public opinion thoroughly rejected the intervention in Iraq and, with it, the rationale of the emerging US strategy.

In sum, while the United States and Europe are apparently conducting the same policy of fighting terrorism and "civilising" Arab-Muslim peoples, they are actually pursuing different policies, based on different premises, visions and contents. Strategic approaches are basically different. This is why US calls for the Europeans to join their Middle Eastern policies in the Gulf under a transatlantic umbrella have received only limited responses, if any at all.

This is not to say that these differences in strategic approach are causing conflict or breaking off transatlantic relations. As said, the "community" remains an important safety net (and the US Europe's most important strategic asset). The overall result, though, is a kind of sluggish and, above all, uneven cooperation, based on voluntary performance and variable geometries. Transatlantic cooperation in the Gulf and the Middle East is ultimately limited by strategic divergence – as well as by languishing US leadership. This is the current "weak strategic convergence" scenario.

#### **NATO in the Gulf: some transatlantic cooperation**

Cooperation is not lacking, however. While the US and the EU-3 (France, Germany, United Kingdom) have ultimately succeeded in harmonising their approaches to oppose development of an Iranian non-civilian nuclear industry and to shepherd Teheran back into the non-proliferation fold, a good deal of transatlantic cooperation in the Gulf area is taking place within NATO. The latter, while not supporting the US presence in Iraq militarily, is implementing an open-ended political initiative towards the Gulf region through the ICI. Furthermore, the Alliance is incrementally contributing to Afghanistan's stabilisation, just north of the Gulf region. Finally, NATO provides a loose framework for those members willing to train Iraqi forces. In both Afghanistan and the Gulf, NATO is the framework in which the transatlantic cooperation that exists is unfolding. It is in this framework that the Europeans are playing a security role in the Gulf.

To evaluate the scenario of transatlantic cooperation in the Gulf within

the NATO framework, the ICI's performance in pursuing its own finalities must first be assessed. In this respect, it should be borne in mind that, at least for the time being, what the Alliance is doing in the Gulf through the ICI is providing security cooperation. The ICI is not meant to prepare for GCC membership in the Alliance or to provide a security guarantee. Second, it must be seen whether the ICI can contribute to preparing the conditions for the emergence of a region-wide security organisation. Looking into these two points should make it possible to draw some conclusions on Europe's role in the area when acting in the framework of the Alliance.

**The ICI's performance.** To assess the ICI's performance, reference must briefly be made to its predecessor, the Mediterranean Dialogue, carried out by NATO with a number of Arab countries and Israel since 1995. While the Dialogue did not really succeed in dispelling negative perceptions and improving NATO's image in the Mediterranean Arab countries, nor in establishing a substantive political dialogue, it did manage to set up much appreciated bilateral military cooperation with the governments in question. Attempts have been made by NATO to enlarge this military cooperation to security governance after the model of the Partnership for Peace (PfP), but to no avail.

The NATO Secretariat devoted considerable efforts to developing the ICI in its first year of life, with the direct commitment of Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and Deputy Secretary-General Alessandro Minuto Rizzo. They succeeded in increasing the opportunities for exchanges and contacts. The ICI's limits, however, are similar to those already observed for the Mediterranean Dialogue and stem from the Arab ruling classes' ambivalence *vis-à-vis* the West. While political dialogue with the Western countries is an asset for their economic, military and international strengthening, it is a liability from the point of view of their domestic constituencies. So, while Arab governments participate in the cooperative frameworks set up by the West – such as the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue or the EU Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – with a view to obtaining all possible advantages, they avoid fully engaging in political cooperation as this would clash with their public opinions and weaken their legitimacy.

Some countries, like Qatar and Kuwait, closer to the United States than others, see NATO as a reinforced American presence and welcome it without problems. Other countries look upon the European allies stepping in with favour as they may offer more flexibility in domestic and regional political relations with respect to the United States. Most of the elites are perplexed, however, about the contradictions stemming from NATO's poor image in the Gulf public opinion. In a recent interview, these issues were

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epitomised by Mustapha Alani, Senior Advisor for the Gulf Research Center.<sup>11</sup> He points out that NATO is widely unknown in the Arab countries and that, when it is known, "the average Arab citizen ordinarily has a negative image of it". As for governments, "as yet, they are not certain about emerging NATO strategies nor do they see them clearly". More importantly, by making reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he stresses that security convergence between Arabs and NATO remains weak, if not negative.

These perceptions curb Arab governments' freedom in dealing with NATO no less than the performance of NATO cooperation. What one finds is a multiplication of exchanges and meetings that do not lead to any substantive joint political initiatives. NATO's profuse activity never manages to go beyond a certain diplomatic ceiling (and the same could be said for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, EMP). It never achieves the political breakthrough the West expects from its initiatives.

As for Arab liberals and opposition groups, they have other kinds of problems with NATO. For some, it is not clear how NATO will be able to walk the tight rope between stability and reforms, interference and partnership. They see a potential contradiction between, on one hand, NATO's ability – already tested in the Mediterranean – to reinforce the partners' armed forces militarily and, consequently, the incumbent regimes politically and, on the other, the possibility of introducing security governance and political reforms. While all Arab regimes shy away from accepting and introducing security governance,<sup>12</sup> political reforms are not within NATO's scope or competence. If security cooperation, so the argument runs, is not preceded or effectively linked up with political reform, including security governance, the net result may well be a reinforcement of incumbent regimes and a more difficult path to democratic transition.<sup>13</sup> This view is particularly strong in the Gulf, where civil societies' transition to reform is in a way more advanced than in the Mediterranean.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "L'Alliance atlantique et le Monde Arabe", *La Lettre du CERMAM*, October 2005, pp. 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> H. Hänggi, F. Tanner, *Promoting Security Governance in the EU's Neighbourhood*, Chaillot Paper no 80 (Paris: EU-ISS, July 2005) pp. 66 ff.

<sup>13</sup> S. Calderbank, "NATO and the Middle East", *Middle East International*, no. 742, 21 January 2005, pp. 30-2.

<sup>14</sup> On the emerging democratic environment in the Gulf, see J. Crystal, *Political reform and the Prospects for Democratic Transition in the Gulf*, Working paper no. 11 (Madrid: FRIDE, July 2005); G. Luciani, F. Neugart (eds) *The EU and the GCC. A New Partnership* (updated version), (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, CAP, RSCAS, February 2005), section on "The New Arab Bourgeoisie" pp. 17 ff.

***The ICI's contribution to a region-wide security organisation.*** When it comes to building a regional security cooperation perspective, it is hard to define the role of the ICI. Regional security cooperation can be pursued in either a balance of power or a cooperative security perspective. If the perspective is to set out a working balance of power among the countries of the region, the ICI could play a positive role whether it remains limited to the GCC countries or is enlarged to Iraq. With the GCC countries and Iraq in the same security framework, the historical Iraqi threat to the GCC would be attenuated, if not neutralised, and the Gulf's intractable security triangle would be simplified. On the other hand, establishing a firmer balance of power with respect to Iran would reinforce mutual mistrust and threat perceptions and create Arab pressures for the ICI to be turned into a kind of Gulf Treaty Organisation. As a result, if regarded from a balance of power perspective, the ICI's role could entail negative as well as positive aspects.

In a cooperative security perspective, the ICI could surely provide the GCC countries (and Iraq) with an extensive and well-tested experience with military cooperation and confidence-building. This could assist the Gulf countries in setting up the pattern of regional security cooperation Pollack calls a "security condominium", namely a Gulf CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe). However, unlike in Europe, the situation in the Gulf hardly allows for non-regional powers to participate in the initiative. To lay down the foundations of such a Gulf regional security organisation, the pact must be among regional countries only.

This is not to exclude the ICI. At least in principle, the GCC countries could well sign a regional pact while keeping their alliances. But the ICI cannot be the platform on which to build a regional security organisation. It might be added that, if it were used for that purpose, it would have to keep a low profile. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine the Gulf countries sitting together to talk about regional security in a framework in which the ICI was enlarged to Iraq and/or reinforced so as to look more like a Gulf NATO. NATO's presence in the Gulf, while definitely an important factor in the regional balance of power, requires more prudence in a cooperative perspective or it could work as a divisive factor. This is certainly an element being weighed by governments and elites in the GCC today and, should the ICI be enlarged to Iraq, in this country as well.

All in all, NATO and the ICI do not appear particularly suited to the task of providing security to the GCC countries and the Gulf in general. To be effective in a balance of power perspective, the ICI would have to evolve towards providing some kind of security guarantee. Not only would such a development hardly be approved by NATO members today, it is not entirely sure that it would be welcomed by the GCC countries (or probably

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Iraq) either. For the time being, not knowing what Iraq will be like in the future, the GCC countries' preferred option is a form of regional security understanding, if not organisation. In this sense, they would not allow the ICI to become a kind of Gulf NATO as such an evolution would create tensions with Iran. They do not want to become the battlefield in a clash between the West and Iran. They want the West to reassure them, while trying to establish some kind of regional security understanding or organisation.

In this context, there can be no doubt that Europe's security role is weak and not very supportive with respect to the ICI, but this is not the point. The point is that the ICI and NATO do not seem suited to Gulf security; they could even play a negative role. In the framework of security cooperation, as weak as that presently provided by the ICI, neither the United States nor Europe can play a significant role. In a sense, concentrating on cooperation within the ICI could even be detrimental to Europe's aspirations to play a security role in the region. A strengthened autonomous European role would seem more appropriate for European aims as well as more helpful in transatlantic terms. This leads up to the last scenario.

#### **The European Union in the Gulf: an enhanced presence**

Europe and, in particular, the EU are seeking to play a more significant political and security role in the Gulf. This section will consider, first, how this is being pursued, and second, in what way these endeavours are set in a wider transatlantic perspective.

The EU and its members have recently singled out three main policy leads:

- the "EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East" initiative;
- renewed concern for strengthening relations with the GCC countries and the GCC itself;
- concern relating to regional WMD developments in the region, in particular with respect to Iran.

**Strategic Partnership.** The EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East is in a sense the EU's response to the US Greater Middle East Initiative. It lists the EU's actual and potential relations with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean areas (such as the Southern Mediterranean countries comprised in the EMP and the Gulf Arab countries included in the GCC, as well as individual countries such as Yemen, Iraq

and Iran) with a view to developing uniform EU approaches and policies towards them, applying the same principles in implementing policies, and setting out an overall agenda contemplating measures that fit the different countries and the state of EU relations with them.

Since the EU recognises that its relations with the countries "east of Jordan" are considerably less developed than those with the Mediterranean countries, the Strategic Partnership stresses precisely the need to develop relations with them. Still, it provides for differentiated responses and measures on a country-by-country or area-by-area basis rather than a homogeneous agenda. Ironically, what it fails to work out is a strategy: EU policies will be guided by similar concepts and objectives but they will not be directed at shaping new patterns of regional relations with the countries concerned, nor will they provide the wider Mediterranean-Middle Eastern region with a shared framework similar to that of the EMP, the EU-GCC, the ICI or the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Initiative. In this sense, while the EU's emerging willingness to reinforce its relations with the countries "east of Jordan" (namely the Gulf countries and Yemen) is clearly stated, as are the principles the EU intends to apply in developing relations with these countries, an overall design is lacking, leaving the EU without a strategy towards the area.

This relative underdevelopment in EU relations with the Gulf countries is accentuated by the fact that the EU has meanwhile dynamically started to develop its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with the Mediterranean countries belonging to the EMP. While there can be no doubt that the ENP and the strategic significance the "neighbourhood" concept has assumed in the EU's broad strategy do not allow for any comprehensive cooperative scheme including both the Southern Mediterranean and the Gulf countries, a systemic link between the two areas needs to be worked out. Neugart and Schumacher have proposed a policy of "concentric circles".<sup>15</sup> This seems a good suggestion. They support the need for a more stringent and systematic bond between the two areas in the framework of a genuine EU broad strategy towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East. They express a special concern that EU relations "east of Jordan" need to be developed in the framework of a comprehensive Mediterranean and Middle East rationale.

Yet, while such a comprehensive rationale can be applied immediately to the GCC countries (and probably Yemen), for the time being the same

<sup>15</sup> F. Neugart, T. Schumacher, "Thinking about the EU's Future Neighbourhood Policy in the Middle East: From the Barcelona Process to a Euro-Middle East Partnership", in Hanelt, C.-P. G. Luciani, F. Neugart (eds), *Regime Change in Iraq* (Florence: RSCAS Press, 2004) pp. 169-92.

cannot as easily be done with regard to Iraq and Iran. An inclusive strategy should, however, be clearly stated by the EU today, attesting to the EU's willingness and intention to engage in the Middle East in addition to the Mediterranean. While the present EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East states that its "policy agenda will be developed mainly through existing instruments and mechanisms", the anticipation of a new instrument with new mechanisms, namely a comprehensive project combining the Mediterranean and the Middle East, would help shape a broad and homogeneous regional policy framework for the future.

**EU-GCC relations.** EU-GCC relations have progressed slowly over time, certainly more slowly than the size and reciprocal interests of the two bodies would justify. Further progress was made after the 15<sup>th</sup> GCC-EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting in Manama, Bahrain, on 5 April 2005. In fact, Saudi Arabia finally managed to sign the bilateral agreement with the United States required for it to become a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Its membership in the WTO, in turn, paves the way for the finalisation of the very long negotiations on implementing an EU-GCC free trade area. This agreement will not, in and of itself, solve some important issues, such as petrochemicals,<sup>16</sup> but it will provide a strong signal that EU-GCC relations are being strengthened.

This reinforcement would also allow for progress in the various issues that form the object of the EU-GCC political dialogue. There happens to be significant convergence in the political dialogue. One aspect of that convergence regards the future of Palestine. There is a strong correspondence in the feelings and objectives of the EU and the GCC states on this point. The Joint Communiqué issued by the 15<sup>th</sup> Joint Council devotes a long section to commenting on "Developments in the Middle East": nine of the eleven paragraphs are devoted to Palestine, all expressing a strong convergence on short-term as well as long-term questions. The political dialogue includes topics such as human rights, security organisation in the region, terrorism and non-proliferation. More in general, it paves the way for addressing the question of political reform in intergovernmental relations – provided it is done judiciously – learning from the extensive and positive

<sup>16</sup> On this specific point, as well as on the full range of EU-GCC relations, see Luciani, Neugart (eds), *The EU and the GCC. A New Partnership* and the essays written by Jamil Merdad and Abdullah Baabood in C. Koch (ed.), *Unfulfilled Potential: Exploring the GCC-EU Relationship*, pp. 35-41 and 43-54, respectively.

experience accumulated by the EU in the EMP framework. The EU Strategic Partnership could also be of help here.

The conditions for making EU-GCC relations a success story are there. The EU needs to go ahead with more determination to enlarge its pattern of relations from the Mediterranean to the Gulf. The latter could turn out to be rather responsive. A more important EU role in the GCC would give Europe a higher profile and more credibility in the entire Gulf area and would allow it to address the need to develop more diversified and solid relations with Iraq and Iran. This higher European profile would also match GCC expectations. It would strengthen the GCC countries politically in the regional framework and give them more stability domestically. A reinforced GCC in the region would solidify the present balance-of-power mechanism which ensures a rather fragile regional stability. A more solid balance-of-power setting would, in turn, allow for a shift to a more modern and stable regional security organisation based on cooperation. Domestic stability in the GCC would also allow for reforms to be undertaken in those countries, as differentiated and gradual as that process could be. These reforms would also contribute to enhancing security in the region. All these changes would be mutually reinforcing.

In sum, while prospects for EU-Gulf relations are promising, they remain undeveloped. Indeed, the strengthening of the EU-GCC agreement expected for the end of 2005 was put off once again.<sup>17</sup>

**WMD and non-proliferation.** Non-proliferation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East is a concern that the EU has recently begun to address more systematically than in the past. Of late, the EU has mainstreamed its non-proliferation policies by introducing standard clauses on this issue in its agreements with third countries, in this case countries in the Mediterranean – where the clause is being discussed within the framework of the Association Agreements – and in the Middle East. The EU Strategic Partnership envisages this policy and differentiates between its application in the Mediterranean and the instruments available for negotiating on non-proliferation “east of Jordan”. As pointed out, in fact, non-proliferation is a topic on the EU-GCC political dialogue’s regular agenda.

The EU has practically delegated three member countries, France, Germany and the UK, to negotiate with Iran to try to prevent the nuclear industry which the country is developing from being turned into a military

<sup>17</sup> See the comment by C. Koch, “GCC-EU ties: news again is no news”, *Araa. Gulf Views*, 26 May 2006

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industry fit for producing nuclear weapons. The EU linked itself to these negotiations by associating its Secretary General/High Representative (representing the EU intergovernmental dimension) to the so-called EU-3. Negotiations were interrupted by the new Ahmadinejad-led Iranian conservative government sworn in mid-2005. Efforts to resume talks are being made in harmony with US diplomacy.

Non-proliferation in the Gulf is an extremely sensitive issue, whose relevance and impact goes beyond the region to affect the whole of the Middle East and North Africa. The EU is trying to address this challenge in a cooperative way. Its activity in this field, although probably not sufficient to ensure success, contributes to enhancing its security profile in the region and giving the EU a chance to participate in the endeavour of making some kind of regional security organisation possible.

These three clusters of EU activity in the Gulf offer a mixed picture. On the one hand, it is clear that the EU is reluctant to play a role in the region. Indubitably, EU relations with the GCC – the most developed in the region – lag behind. The perspective set out by the EU Strategic Partnership puts forward a number of broad policy orientations but – as argued above – ironically fails to provide an overall strategy aimed at increasing the EU's intercourse with the region. The EU seems more preoccupied with a number of important, though still limited, economic interests than with the need to develop its presence and its political and security capabilities in the Gulf region in addition to the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, the EU-3 initiative towards Iran shows that Europe can play a security role based on its own principles and objectives. True, the EU-3 initiative did not succeed. However this was due less to weaknesses in the European diplomatic platform than to the changes that cropped up in Iran's international and domestic conditions. If European diplomacy proved unable to come to terms with the radicals now in power at Teheran, the United States cannot hope to coerce Iran either, for a number of evident reasons: Iraq is overstressing American forces; Iraq's weakness and the role the Shiites play in the country are objectively reinforcing Teheran; and the UN Security Council's constellation is not necessarily in favour of the West. While these conditions have brought about – as tactical as it may be – a transatlantic rapprochement tilting towards European "dialogue" rather than US coercion, what is worth noting is that the EU cooperative approach makes sense and could well evolve into a platform for joint transatlantic action.

If this mixed picture is taken into consideration, what it seems to suggest is that Europe can play a security role in the Gulf precisely by developing

and strengthening its own initiative. In a transatlantic perspective, autonomous reinforcement of the European and EU role in the region will be more helpful than participation in the inherently limited ICI operations. At the same time, a more autonomous European role is what the GCC countries, in particular, expect and desire. These countries are rather disappointed and concerned by the US performance in the Gulf and its consequences. They see the reinforcement of the European presence in the GCC and the Gulf in general as a reassurance and a necessary balancing. Thus the EU is called upon to play a security role, beneficial to both the United States and the regional countries, in terms of more and bolder initiatives in the region. All it has to do is be more assertive and confident in renewing and enhancing its links with the GCC, setting out a substantive and consistent strategy towards the region, and developing – wherever possible – its political initiative in the same way it did with the EU-3 negotiations with Iran. Finally, Europe should note that a new regime is emerging in Iraq which deserves support. It is, in fact, high time the Europeans set out a policy towards Iraq, regardless of transatlantic rifts.

## **Conclusions**

Can Europe be a security player in the Gulf? After looking at the three scenarios, the response is affirmative, but it has to be qualified by two conditions: (a) the role is bound to be limited, although never unimportant; and (b) it will not emerge in a conventional transatlantic context.

What seems to prevail today is a kind of sluggish scenario of no-opposition and no-cooperation. Europeans and Americans, while definitely not hindering respective agendas, are not really cooperating either. With the possible exception of the US and the EU-3 jointly negotiating with Teheran following President Bush's fresh start in June 2006, there is no synergy. Each runs its own initiatives and where Europeans are cooperating, as in the ICI, the pattern of cooperation follows the lines of the split over Iraq. The Italian government, for example, is contributing to the ICI and to the BMENA Democracy Assistance Dialogue, while other European governments pretend these initiatives do not exist or provide only very marginal contributions. As argued here, transatlantic strategic convergence on the Gulf and the Middle East has never been strong. But that weak convergence was turned into a split by the US decision to intervene in Iraq and, above all, by the legal, ideological and political settings in which it was taken. As a result, the idea that a European security role in the Gulf can be developed in association with the United States, in a conventional transatlantic context, hardly seems feasible – at least for the time being.

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On the other hand, the alternative should not be between acting in a conventional transatlantic context or not acting at all. What the above analysis suggests is that Europe and the EU should be more assertive and less hesitant in carrying out their cooperation policies, in both the economic and security spheres. These policies may reassure and strengthen the GCC countries and offer a prospect for emerging Iraqi parties. They could also provide the United States with alternatives and new options with respect to policies that are not working at present, as in the case of non-proliferation diplomacy with Iran. In this way, while the EU's role as a Gulf player is enhanced, it would also become more helpful and significant in transatlantic terms.