No Real Alternative: Why the Gulf Will Rely on the U.S.

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Articles & Testimony

Gulf leaders know that neither China, Russia, nor a "Mideast NATO" can replace the scale, capability, and strategic commitments that Washington brings, though they are still looking to recalibrate the partnership somewhat following Israel's Qatar strike.

Israel's attack on Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar, on September 9 jarred the region and spurred a new outburst of skepticism about the value of U.S. security commitments. The U.S. has long sought a stable regional environment in which American partners do not attack one another, which the Doha attack obviously disrupted.

Nevertheless, the Middle East simply has no viable alternative to U.S. regional security efforts for the foreseeable future. Qatar and other Gulf states have been subject to other attacks that the U.S. could neither deter nor immediately punish (such as the drone and missile strikes on Saudi Aramco's oil facilities in 2019 and 2020). Regional moderates have no plausible alternative patrons or policy approaches that would keep them out of the line of fire, and American security commitments remain both valid and vital in important ways.

The Nature of U.S. Guarantees

Some of the confusion here is inherent to the collective-security system the U.S. developed after World War II, which now encompasses some 70 countries. Given the huge span of responsibility and the American people's reluctance to get bogged down in foreign conflicts, policy makers have prioritized decisive responses to only the most destabilizing conflicts: Korea in 1950, Kuwait in 1990, and Ukraine today, leaving less significant or one-off military challenges to diplomacy or the victims' own agency.

This American approach is best seen in the capacious language in NATO's Article V, dictated by Washington at the inception of the alliance: in the case of an attack on a NATO member state, each NATO member shall take "such action as it deems necessary including the use of armed force."

Thus the U.S. has not spelled out what will generate a U.S. military response and what will not. Whether U.S. security commitments are treaty-based or non-legally binding (like all its Middle East arrangements except with NATO ally Turkey) or just implicit (such as Korea, Kuwait, or Ukraine), they have proven trustworthy when a nation's survival is threatened by military attack. But Washington generally does not respond with hostilities to one-off acts.

All this should not be a surprise to America's Gulf friends. Since 1953, the U.S. has had a legally-binding defense treaty with South Korea, backed by 28,000 troops in country. Yet the U.S. has never responded to the many North Korean attacks far more serious than Israel's strike in Doha, including a huge commando attack on the South Korean president's residence in 1968, the killing of four South Korean cabinet members in Burma in 1983, or the sinking of a South Korean corvette with 46 killed-in-action in 2010. Indeed, the U.S. often does not respond militarily to attacks on its own personnel and installations, including the capture of the USS Pueblo in 1968, the attack on the USS Liberty in 1967, the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, the attacks on the Marine barracks and the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1983 and 1984, and the Iranian seizure of U.S. sailors in 2016.

Such reluctance does not mean that U.S. security guarantees are worthless. They are geared to deter and, if deterrence fails, to contain and defeat major international aggression.

U.S. security commitments generally include commitments to joint diplomatic effort, consultations, and in some cases military actions by the parties to promote regional or international peace and stability. Such language characterizes U.S. commitments beginning with the North Atlantic Treaty and most every U.S. security agreement since then (for example, the 2008 U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement contains such language in four different locations).

Events such as the Qatar attack are exactly the sort of destabilizing behavior the U.S. is supposed to deter, including by our friends. (The tripartite British, French, and Israeli campaign in Suez in 1956 is an historic example; U.S. actions in 2006 to halt the Israel-Hizbullah war in Lebanon is another.) Contracting states, including the U.S., accept a responsibility to promote predictability and stability as one non-military means to contain and deter threats to the international order or the security of the

partnered states. Inevitably, the bulk of this burden falls on the United States, given its wealth and might.

The Best of Available Alternatives

This growing frustration has prompted some Gulf states to consider diversifying their options, as seen in 2021 when the Biden administration sought to resize its presence in the Middle East. But so far, no viable alternative has emerged.

The American military presence is huge and diversified, and any replacement is difficult to imagine. It consists of key bases like al-Udeid in Qatar, which hosts the Combined Air Operations Center; Naval Support Activity Bahrain, which hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet; and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, which houses a U.S. Army forward base. The U.S. also drives regional integration based on intelligence-sharing, missile defense, command-and-control infrastructure, arms sales, training exercises, and a whole atmosphere of deterrence—none of which could easily or quickly be replaced.

The most discussed alternative is China. It has become a prominent partner in the region, signing deals with Gulf governments to expand trade, energy, and technological collaboration. Beijing has also dipped its toe into diplomatic initiatives in the region, such as the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in 2023. But China continues to maintain its longstanding and strict policy of nonintervention. Moreover, China's military footprint in the Middle East is minimal. Beijing has thus far lacked both the capabilities and the will to provide the kind of security guarantees the U.S. offers its partners in the region. For all its ambitions, China is neither prepared nor willing to become a security guarantor for the region.

Another potential alternative is Russia. Moscow has been opportunistic in its regional engagement while defense sales and trade ties remain its focus. However, the war in Ukraine has stretched Russian resources thin. Its long-term regional credibility remains unproven or illusory, as shown in Syria in 2024 and Iran in 2025. Russia's largest military presence in the Middle East, in Syria, fell apart during the collapse of the Asad regime last year. That presence will take time to rebuild. Russia is determined to grow its influence in the region, but it is too constrained by its current obligations to become a robust security partner anytime soon.

Some in the Gulf look at the European Union or individual European countries as potential contenders. The Europeans are viewed as more balanced on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and they maintain very strong ties with countries in the Middle East, including a recent **EU initiative (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Joint%20Communication%20to%20the%20European%20Parliament%20and%20the%20Council%20-%20A%20Strategic%20Partnership%20with%20the%20Gulf.pdf)** to bolster relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council. But the EU is too fractured as an entity to be a reliable security guarantor. Both the organization and its member states are heavily reliant upon the U.S. security footprint in the region to offer a viable alternative. More fundamentally, the EU has neither the military resources nor the "strategic culture" to begin to satisfy regional security needs.

Finally, some have floated the idea of a regional "NATO-like" organization. Many of the Gulf countries, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are working hard to modernize their militaries and to build out their own defense industrial developments through new national strategies. These efforts will go a long way toward security independence, but they remain nascent at best. Regional coordination is both limited and heavily reliant upon U.S. defense systems and infrastructure.

Decoupling from the U.S. would require not just finding new partners but rebuilding the region's defense infrastructure from scratch. And the first question would be: who can take over the job the Americans did in 1990 after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait? Who could lead, organize, and provide most of the muscle for a successful response to major aggression? And second: who else could have managed the Gaza ceasefire?

Gulf Responses—More About Leverage Than Loyalty

Arab and Islamic country leaders held an emergency summit in Doha to address the Israeli strike, but the outcomes consisted largely of rote condemnations of the strike and pledges of solidarity. The Gulf Cooperation Council **pledged (https://www.gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2025-9-15-3.aspx)** to form a "defense pact" and to build up the region's "deterrent capabilities," though we do not yet know what these ambitions mean or how it will address the fact that the U.S. is at the center of the Gulf states' military integration.

Gulf and regional states are likely to continue to take tactical steps to convey their ire with Washington, including the recent Saudi-Pakistan security agreement and Egyptian-Turkish military exercises. Some countries may choose diplomatic hedging, including taking public visits to Beijing or Moscow or conducting joint military exercises with Russia and China.

These moves are more about leverage than loyalty. They will be designed to remind Washington that the Gulf states have other options and will increasingly use them if the U.S. will not rein in Israel. Trump's recent position on no West Bank annexation, a forced Netanyahu apology directly to the Qataris, additional security guarantees enshrined in an executive order, as well as meeting with top Islamic state leaders during the UN General Assembly, all suggest the U.S. is getting the message.

Despite growing frustration, Gulf leaders know that the U.S. remains the only actor with the scale, capability, and long-term commitments to provide security guarantees, though they are still looking to recalibrate the partnership. Israel's Doha strike has reinforced their desire for more transparent coordination, stronger security guarantees, and above all, a durable and credible commitment that a crisis like this will not happen again.

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