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Defence alliances for self-reliance: UK-GCC partnership in the post-American Gulf

On December 6-7, 2016, Gulf Cooperation Council's leaders and United Kingdom's Prime Minister Theresa May met in Manama discussing ways to enhance mutual cooperation: they launched the GCC-UK Strategic Partnership in political, defence, regional security and trade fields.

Looking at post-Brexit, London aims to secure tight trade relations with the Gulf monarchies (bilateral as well as with the region as a whole). In the post-American Gulf, UK is a key-ally for GCC countries to improve defence skills and upgrade security capabilities, with an eye to the demanding construction of energy-driven, and no more energy-centred, economic structures. After French president Francois Hollande in 2015, Theresa May was the only foreign official to be hosted by the annual GCC Summit so far.

The UK and the GCC agreed to boost defence cooperation, in terms of capacity, capability and interoperability, including peace support operations and combined crisis response planning. The UK Regional Defence Staff will be based in Dubai to coordinate the British military presence in the Gulf. The allies also decided to establish a National Security Dialogue to help Gulf monarchies' harmonisation in defence issues. Moreover, London has just opened a permanent military base in Bahrain.

In the same days, the US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter pressed Gulf monarchies to pursue self-reliance in security matters, addressing the *IISS-Manama Dialogue 2016*. However, the Gulf Union proposal is still blocked by sovereignty concerns, since the GCC isn't a security community yet. Oman has repeatedly opted-out, while Kuwait's government will have to cope with a brand-new elected National Assembly dominated by opposition deputies. The 'defence partnership' path reaffirmed by the UK looks different from the American one: Riyadh recognizes the imperative of developing self-defence capabilities and human expertise in the medium-long term, but needs to enhance and reconfigure stable security alliances now. For instance, the German minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen, visited Saudi Arabia on December 8 to finalise a training deal for Saudi military officers: defence partnerships, as the UK-GCC one, are also fundamental for knowledge-transfer in order to construct a reliable self-defence 'toolkit'. Looking at the global picture, president Trump's still undefined Middle Eastern politics could turn into

further disengagement and isolationism, restraining Washington's role as the Gulf's external security provider.

Maritime security is the traditional pillar of the relationship between London and the Gulf monarchies. Now that signals of maritime activity along Gulf's choke-points are on the rise (as in Hormuz and in the Bab-el-Mandeb), because of states (Iran) and non-state actors (the Yemeni Houthis, pirates) confrontational behaviours, freedom of navigation reacquires a prominent role in bilateral cooperation.

From a regional point of view, the fierce battle for Aleppo, coupled with Michel Aoun's election as Lebanese president, testify that Lebanon, "useful Syria" (i.e. according to Assad's regional allies, the Alawite coast and Damascus, which preserves a strategic corridor to Hezbollah's fiefdoms) and Iraq are more and more an Iranian geopolitical space. The UK-GCC final statement stresses the necessity to "counter Iran's destabilising activities in the region".

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