



Possibilities Architects:
Inspiring Ascending Beyond

From Mohammad Javad Zarif to Badr Al Busaidi:

**Transitioning from Containment to a Regional Cooperative Security
Architecture**

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History is sometimes shaped not by the emergence of new ideas, but by the return of ideas that once appeared premature. In foreign policy as well, there is no shortage of proposals that, when first advanced, were dismissed as idealistic or even impractical, only to reappear years later - after crises had imposed their costs on all parties - this time articulated by different actors.

Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi's recent article in *Le Monde* can be read through this same lens. What makes the article significant is not merely its critique of the policy of containing Iran or its call for dialogue; rather, its true significance lies in the fact that such an argument is being advanced by the foreign minister of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member state - a region where, for the past four decades, a substantial part of the security architecture has been predicated on the assumption that the security of Arab states is contingent upon containing Iran.

Al Busaidi, of course, is not the first to challenge this assumption. Years earlier, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif - through the 'Amity' (MWADA¹) plan and the (MENARA²) initiative - as well as former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani - via the (HOPE³) - had advocated for an alternative paradigm for Persian Gulf security; a framework anchored in regional dialogue, shared responsibility, and the inclusivity of all littoral states.

Perhaps at the time these initiatives were proposed, many viewed them as overly optimistic. Yet today, when the Omani Foreign Minister reaches a similar conclusion in different terms, the crux of the matter is no longer who first articulated the idea; rather, it is that regional experience has brought some of those very concepts back to the center of security discourse.

This convergence is less a political alignment than it is a convergence of experiences. The issue at stake is not the triumph of a single narrative, but the gradual erosion of a security paradigm.

¹ Muslim West Asian Dialogue Association (MWADA)

² Middle East Network for Research and Atomic Progress (MENARA)

³ Hormuz Peace Endeavor

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the prevailing policy towards Iran has, at various levels, been predicated on a form of ‘containment’ - a strategy pursued through economic sanctions, security alliances, the extensive military presence of extra-regional powers, and efforts to curtail Iran’s regional influence.

This policy has undoubtedly been driven by specific rationales. The interventionist and expansionist US regional policy; Israel’s overt and covert maneuvering to advance its long-standing strategic ambitions; the anxieties of Arab states regarding Iran’s military and security posture; the expansion of Tehran-aligned networks; intractable geopolitical disputes; deep-seated mistrust between Iran and the United States; and the ramifications of great-power competition - involving the US, China, Europe, and Russia - are all irreducible realities. However, in the realm of policymaking, the mere existence of a concern is insufficient; the more critical question is whether the adopted policy has, in fact, achieved its intended objectives.

Four decades of experience have posed at least one critical question for all regional actors: if the policy of containment was intended to establish durable security, why does the Persian Gulf today remain one of the world’s most volatile regions?

From the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and from the crises in Syria and Yemen to the direct and indirect confrontations of recent years, the region has not only failed to stabilize but has gradually entered an escalating cycle of security competition - a cycle from whose costs almost no state has been spared.

Energy security, global trade, investment, maritime shipping, and even the economic development of the regional states have all been severely impacted by this situation. This is not to suggest that responsibility lies solely with one party; on the contrary, it demonstrates that none of the actors have been capable of generating security in isolation.

Security: A Collective Good

One of the defining features of security in the Persian Gulf is that, unlike many other domains of public policy, it is collective in nature. A state may be able to accelerate its economic growth or reform its education system on its own, but regional security cannot be provided unilaterally. Security in the Persian Gulf either exists for all or for none. It is precisely this characteristic that has led many international relations theorists to conclude that regional security is less the product of one actor's predominance than the outcome of a shared set of rules by which all actors - including rivals - consider themselves bound.

From this perspective, the significance of the Amity plan, the Hormuz Peace Endeavor, and now Al Busaidi's article lies not in their specific details, but in their common rationale: that durable security cannot be constructed *against* one of the regional actors. This proposition, however, does not imply a negation of the security concerns held by Arab states or Iran. On the contrary, the strength of this outlook lies in its starting point from a realist premise: differences exist, competition is present, and mistrust is tangible. The core question, however, is this: is the path to managing these disputes to further entrench the same paradigms that have failed to foster durable security over the past four decades.

The Security Dilemma: A Cycle from Which No Actor Emerges as a Winner

To answer this question, one of the most widely recognized concepts in international relations - the 'security dilemma' - offers a useful analytical framework. Under such conditions, every measure a state takes to enhance its own security is perceived by the other side as threatening, while the latter's countermeasures, in turn, heighten the former's sense of insecurity. Neither side necessarily intends to go to war; yet both perceive themselves as compelled to strengthen their defensive capabilities and deterrent posture.

Iran regards the development of its missile capabilities as an integral component of its deterrence strategy. Arab states, however, perceive the same measure as an intensification of the threat and, in response, seek to acquire more advanced weaponry and expand their military cooperation with the

United States. Tehran, in turn, interprets this military presence as evidence of encirclement and mounting pressure and consequently emphasizes the further further strengthening of its deterrent capabilities. From their respective perspectives, both sides are acting defensively; yet the outcome is heightened insecurity for all. This is precisely the cycle that has cast a shadow over security relations in the Persian Gulf for the past four decades. The problem, however, may be even more complex than this.

The Perceptual Dilemma: When Even Benign Intentions Are Perceived as Threatening

The security dilemma alone, however, does not fully account for the realities of relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors. If the problem were confined to an arms race or the balance of power, every indication of de-escalation should also lead to a corresponding reduction in mistrust. Yet the experience of the Middle East demonstrates otherwise. In this region, even measures undertaken in good faith are sometimes interpreted not as evidence of a genuine change in behavior, but rather as a temporary tactical maneuver or a prelude to extracting further concessions.

This is precisely what may be termed a ‘perceptual dilemma’ - a situation wherein actors are deeply mistrustful not only of each other’s behavior but also of each other’s intentions. In such a climate, every action, prior to being evaluated based on objective realities, is interpreted through the lens of past experiences and accumulated suspicions.

To be sure, Iran is no exception to this dynamic. Just as many Arab states perceive Iran’s growing military capabilities and regional influence as threats to their security, many in Tehran view Arab states’ security cooperation with the United States or Israel not as defensive in nature, but as part of a strategy aimed at containing Iran - or even at shifting the regional balance of power against it. Under such conditions, the problem lies not merely in a divergence of interests, but also in divergent perceptions of reality. This is why mistrust in the Persian Gulf is not simply a product of political differences; it has itself become a mechanism through which those differences are continually reproduced.

Mistrust Is Not Merely a Consequence of Disagreement; It Also Reproduces It

This may well be the most important lesson of the past four decades. For when every action taken by the other side is interpreted through the presumption of malign intent, even a change in behavior does not necessarily lead to a corresponding change in perceptions. Under such conditions, the policy of containment inadvertently becomes a self-reinforcing cycle: the greater the pressure exerted, the stronger the sense of threat becomes; and the stronger the sense of threat, the greater the perceived need for further containment. From this perspective, Badr Al Busaidi's critique of the policy of containment is not merely a political critique; it is a critique of a security logic that, after four decades, has done more to reproduce insecurity than to generate security.

Is Cooperative Security Naive?

Counter to this analysis, however, lies a significant critique. Critics contend that the core issue is not the policy of containment, but rather Iran's behavior. From their viewpoint, as long as Tehran fails to alter its conduct in certain regional or military domains, advocating for cooperative security is less of a practical strategy than a diplomatic aspiration.

Even granting the validity of the argument regarding the destabilizing nature of Iran's military conduct, the fundamental question remains: Have four decades of the containment policy succeeded in altering the behavior of regional actors - including Iran - to the extent required to establish durable security? Will the continued pursuit of this same policy yield different outcomes?

The central inquiry is not about defending Iran or criticizing Arab states; rather, it is whether the region's historical experience does not compel us to re-evaluate certain underlying assumptions. While no one can guarantee that abandoning the policy of containment will, in itself, resolve all complexities,

there is equally no evidence that the continued pursuit of containment can extricate the region from this cycle of recurring crises.

In policymaking, the most compelling reason to pursue a new course is sometimes not confidence in its success, but rather the failure of the previous one. Perhaps the greatest flaw in many security initiatives in the Middle East has been their assumption that trust is a prerequisite for cooperation. According to this logic, mistrust must first be overcome before cooperation can begin. Yet the historical record of international relations - particularly in post-Second World War Europe, as well as in many other regions - demonstrates precisely the opposite. Trust does not ordinarily precede cooperation; rather, it is built through cooperation.

States often begin by cooperating in limited, low-cost areas where interests converge - from maritime security and crisis management to environmental protection, counter-smuggling efforts, maritime search and rescue, and energy security. Such limited forms of cooperation gradually create channels of communication, reduce the costs of misperception, and enhance the prospects for mutual understanding.

Put differently, trust is not a prerequisite for cooperation; it is a product of cooperation.”

This is perhaps the most important common denominator among the Hormuz Peace Endeavor, the Amity initiative, the MENARA idea, and now Badr Al Busaidi’s essay. None of these initiatives is premised on the assumption that differences have disappeared; rather, they are grounded in the belief that such differences must be managed through cooperation, rather than that cooperation should be deferred until those differences are fully resolved.

A belated return to an idea

Today, after years of war, sanctions, protracted rivalries, and the expanding military presence of extra-regional powers, some regional actors also appear to be gradually reassessing their long-standing assumptions. From this perspective, Badr Al Busaidi’s article should not be viewed merely as a statement of position by a foreign minister; rather, it may be regarded as a

sign of an emerging dialogue on the future of the Gulf security order - a dialogue that the prevailing political climate may not have been ready to entertain years ago.

In this context, regardless of any judgment regarding the success or failure of past diplomatic initiatives, it is difficult to deny that Mohammad Javad Zarif was among the first regional officials to conceptualize Persian Gulf security not through the lens of exclusion or containment, but rather through the framework of cooperative security. Perhaps at the time, this idea was eclipsed by deep-seated mistrust and geopolitical rivalries rather than being engaged in substantive dialogue. Yet, what has gained significance today is not the vindication of an individual, but the gradual return to the very question that he and other architects of these initiatives had posed years ago: Can security ever be constructed against one of the region's actors?

If the experience of the past four decades suggests that the answer is no, perhaps the time has come to reframe the question: not how to contain the other, but how - despite all existing differences - to establish a set of common rules for secure coexistence.

For security, unlike power, is not a commodity that any one state can produce and stockpile on its own. Security is relational: it is generated through interactions among states. This may explain why the future of the Persian Gulf depends less on the extent of its actors' military capabilities than on their ability to break free from the cycle of misperception and the reproduction of mistrust.

If so, the most important lesson of recent decades can be distilled into two propositions: mistrust is not merely a consequence of disagreement; it also reproduces and perpetuates disagreement. It is for precisely this reason that trust is not a prerequisite for cooperation; it is a product of cooperation.