

By Lauren Williamson, UK Defence Forum Research Associate

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which was formed by six Gulf monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula in 1981, currently works to achieve mutual strategic objectives such as promoting trade and commerce, unifying their security response and sharing information and technology. The Gulf Research Center's Riccardo Dugulin argues that the GCC can achieve much more by implementing a Gulf Neighborhood Policy (GNP) modeled on the European one. The problem with the December 2010 report is that recent political turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa may require an overhaul of the proposed strategies.

The report offers straightforward prescriptions for the GCC's engagement with nearby countries, prospective GCC members like Yemen, and distant actors with an impact in the region such as India, China and Russia. The proposed engagement plans are rooted in practical incentive-disincentive methods, prioritizing economic and development programs to bolster struggling economies in nearby states, thereby furthering GCC economic and security interests. The GNP emphasizes reducing trade barriers, increasing GCC consumption of exports from developing countries, easing migration restrictions for labor and promoting religious tourism.

Dugulin utilizes the European Union's policy as a framework for the construction of the GNP and uses its successes and failures to define GCC strategies. A weakness noted in the EU's engagement is its lack of interaction in conflict zones – an option the GCC cannot take if it hopes to strengthen its regional power. With nuclear hostilities brewing in Iran, an unsettled insurgency in Afghanistan, minimal reconstruction in Iraq, civil strife in Yemen and the threat of extremists moving into the Gulf from Pakistan, GCC states are in fact surrounded by crises and potential threats.

Additionally, the unrest that began in Tunisia is said to have "spread" to other nations like Egypt and Libya. The seeds of similar disruptions have sprouted and may be growing in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as well as in GCC states such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The extent of the unrest and the root causes of contributing grievances are specific to each nation and are not yet fully understood by the international community. It may be better to hold off on some of the GNP initiatives until it can be determined whether engagement might be warmly received, or whether certain strategies should be redesigned. A failure for the neighborhood policy during its preliminary phase could be detrimental to the perceived efficacy of the GCC.

And there are dangers in adhering too closely to a European style of neighborhood engagement.

Firstly, as the report notes, the EU is much more cohesive than the GCC, with significant similarities in the governing styles and economies of its 27 nations. Additionally, the EU utilizes a shared currency, which facilitates its own internal economic projects and simplifies engagement with its neighbors. The GCC does not yet share a currency, though it seeks to implement one by 2020. However, because of the ongoing Eurozone crisis, foreign investors may balk at the attempt to implement a unified currency in the GCC which would harm the

GNP's economic objectives, at least initially.

Secondly, the Arab nations that the GCC hopes to engage may be wary of initiatives that mirror those of Europe. Such programs may be interpreted as a Trojan horse for Western imperialism. In fact, the report urges the GNP to align directly with the EU on programs with shared neighborhood countries. But while collaborative efforts can harness greater economic power – indeed, governments can do more with more money – concerted efforts may also contribute to mistrust felt by the recipient country. To that end, it is crucial to create a neighborhood policy that truly reflects the character of GCC states and appeals to the unique identities of the people in the Gulf nations. The GCC must capitalize on one of its greatest strengths: local expertise.

The capstone of the Gulf Research Center's report is its provision of a well defined how-to manual for GCC leaders in creating an optimal infrastructure to appropriately implement development schemes. It details the creation of special banks and regulation bodies. It recommends allowing all stakeholders, from business and government elites to aid organizations and tribal leaders, to participate in the policy process, thus integrating diverse groups. The hope is that the proposed GNP would solidify social bonds between the various countries. Importantly, the report prudently states that achieving peace for the entire region is an unrealistic goal and should not be the objective of the neighborhood policy.

Dugulin offers a warning to the GCC states that if further political turbulence rocks the Arab world, the US may pressure the GCC to take a hard-lined stance. Again, aligning too closely with Western interests could cause problems for the GCC, and acting preemptively against neighboring states may diminish its ability to pursue its independent interests in the future. For instance, the GCC is committed to pursuing nuclear power for civilian-only use. If a neighborhood policy successfully allows the GCC to extend its influence in the region, it can then foster similar objectives among its neighbors. It's possible that Iran might even respond more openly to nuclear negotiations led by the GCC.

In this post-economic crisis, multi-polar world, regional blocs are important tools for countries to advance their own interests. A Gulf Neighborhood Policy has vast potential for the GCC as a conduit for collective response and economic development. Favorable outcomes in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan would pave the way for the GCC to extend its reach elsewhere, thereby eventually benefiting other struggling nations such as Somalia. But best-case scenarios are highly unlikely, and the hazards that accompany such engagements are numerous. The report ultimately falls short in exploring all the facets of the policy and their ramifications. And in light of the recent political unrest in the region, the GCC may need to look inward first before engaging its neighbors.

Report by Riccardo Dugulin for the Gulf Research Center, originally written for the Majalla. You can view the report in its entirety [here](#) .