

## **Regional Security: An Iranian Perspective**

Regional security is important because we are living in a highly interdependent world and this interdependence is not just economic. Moreover there is an increasing insecurity in our region, which states and societies could not overcome just by themselves. The main challenge to regional security in our part of the world is the lack of will to work collectively. Existence of extra-regional players is also contradictory to the spirit of regional cooperation. On the other hand, the revolution in communication giving way to interaction among the peoples and the commonalities between our societies are the opportunities for overcoming regional security challenges.

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Why regional security? How to achieve regional security? And what are the opportunities and challenges of regional security in our part of the world? These are the key questions that we should answer if we hope to have any genuine debate regarding regional security. This short paper attempts to answer the questions from an Iranian perspective.

### **Why regional security?**

There are three reasons why regional security is of vital importance to all of us who live in this part of the world. The first, is the phenomenon of interconnectivity. We are living in a highly interdependent world and the interdependence we speak of is not just economical. Societies are linked and people are connected; boundaries are not just physical and sensitive issues are not just local. Before the tragic event of Sept.11, 2001 the Taliban in Afghanistan demonstrated how even a stateless country can be conducive to regional and international insecurity. In this era of globalization, whose distinguishing feature is death of time and space, our destinies are more interconnected today than at any other time in history, regardless of our differences with regard to lifestyle, mode of governance and geographical setting.

The second reason that we should take the issue of regional security more seriously, is the increasing insecurity in our region. Whether the source of insecurity is domestic or external , insecurities in our region are widespread. Common regional insecurities are everywhere. Some of these insecurities are old and some are new, but they are exclusive to national boundaries. Take the two Arab-Israel conflicts. They have been the source of much regional insecurity over decades. The ramification of this arch conflict is by no means limited to the Arabs or Israelis.

The third reason for a serious discussion on regional security is the inability of states and societies to contain the ripple effects of regional insecurities by themselves. Even the strongest states have failed to provide a secure environment beyond their borders. In a normal setting, states are capable of creating a relatively secure domestic environment, which is itself often precarious. It is not the physical capabilities of individual states and/or societies that provides a secure regional environment, it is

collective action that enables states and/or societies to overcome their shortcomings in a broad regional context.

In a nutshell, interconnectivity, increasing insecurities and inability of independent regional actors to provide a secure trans-national order, necessitates collective and regional cooperation.

### **How regional security can be attained?**

Three essential components of any regional security design need to be mentioned. The first is the definitional component which is of course replete with ambiguities. Actually, there exists a double layer of ambiguity in the concept of regional security: “region” and “security”. What do we mean by region? Where are the boundaries of our region? What is distinctive about our region? Is it history, geography, common culture, national interest and identical threat perception that make us to think regionally?

The same definitional ambiguity applies to the notion of security. Whose security? Is the security of regimes different from the security of states and/or societies? What type and what degree of security is needed. The list of such queries is long. However, in order to attain a minimal level of regional security, these legitimate questions should be raised and answered.

Apart from the definition, the second component of a regional security design is institutional. Two sets of institutions may play a role in this regard: state and civil institutions. It seems that at this juncture, a preliminary attempt at any state-run institutional initiative for regional security is simply out of the question. However, the way is still open for civil, non-governmental and informal interaction. Still, a healthy dose of caution should be exercised when talking about these types of institutions in our region. Any project enacted by these institutions will benefit greatly from close ties with governments and thus facilitate better communication in a cross-regional relations. The ultimate goal of these institutional interactions should be to link states and societies regionally.

The third component is a practical and operational design. For such a plan, an elite group of real regional representations should act as the vanguard. Within the framework of existing regional constraints maybe in the beginning, a limited number of sophisticated personalities from the three major regional players, i.e., Turkey, Egypt and Iran can start drafting a proposal for regional security with an aim of expanding the membership of the participating elite to all regional security actors at both governmental and civil levels. An examination of the history of other regional security designs demonstrates that all have started with as an idea implemented by a group of dedicated individuals whose eventual goal was to eradicate the possibility of war and to build peace among communities which had been shattered by the horrors of war and pains of perpetual insecurity.

### **What are the opportunities and challenges?**

Challenges are significant at three specific levels. Nationally, there exists little will in the different centres of our region to work collectively. Furthermore, the culture of peace and regional cooperation is not well rooted at popular level: an impediment that can only be removed through long term, incremental social and cultural activism.

The ongoing regional conflicts, none of which appear to have an eminent solution, consume almost all the energy of the regional players. These conflicts have given birth to a chain of regional difficulties which have prevented some of the regional elites from looking ahead and gaining a positive futuristic perspective.

Our region is the most tense zone of conflict in the world and by far the region with the most international intervention. Extra-regional players, especially, the United States have long meddled in national as well as regional affairs. The Bush administration's policy of regime change and restructuring the regional order is indeed a clear return to the rules of the colonial game. Such tendencies are contradictory to the spirit of regional cooperation.

In spite of the challenges, opportunities for regional security cooperation are remarkable from at least three angles. Firstly, from a psychological perspective, the disenchantment with violence and the culture of violence among the people of the

region will serve as an asset for future regional buildup. Secondly, the revolution in communication has made room for regional interaction among all layers of our societies, for perhaps the first time in history. Finally, the third regional opportunity is the great commonalties of our societies. These commonalties range from common cultural norms and values to common taste in food and cooking. Thus any regional build up is not going to happen in vacuum. Already the potentials are there and ready to be recognized, defined and reshaped for the construction of a regional security design.

In conclusion, we should work together for regional security simply because we share the same interconnected destiny. We have to start with proper conceptualization and implementation. Small steps by a vanguard elite group from a selected numbers of countries could result in important incremental structural changes in spite of the many challenges faced on a wide range of issues. The lessons learned from other regions suggest that what is needed is a functional idea embraced by determined elites who are not fearful of the collective power of the human race but instead believe in its capacity to construct positive identities, and build institutions which will serve as a bridge across cultures, societies and states.