



# The Case for U.S. Strategic Engagement in the Persian Gulf



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Perspective

May 2021

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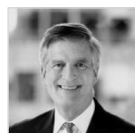
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## In this Report:

The U.S. has key security and geopolitical interests that make access to the Persian Gulf region a critical national security priority. Despite calls for a total withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, it is in Washington's interest to maintain a military presence, even if a lighter one, embedded within the security architecture of the Gulf. Existing challenges in the region extend beyond Iran's regional foreign policy. The Islamic State group (ISIL) has remnants in Syria and the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran in Iraq only further strained the U.S.-led counter-IS campaign. Ongoing conflict in Yemen has opened the state as a base for terrorist operations. In 2021, the Middle East is set to experience massive shifts as unresolved conflicts continue to fuel regional instability. The U.S. should continue to engage GCC states, which remain critical allies in meeting the shifting security challenges in the Middle East.

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## IN BRIEF

- Washington must take seriously GCC states' concerns about Tehran's regional foreign policy. As a GCC member state, Qatar's bilateral relationships with the U.S. and Iran puts it in a position to assist with dialogue and negotiations from within the region.
- To prevent hard-won gains against ISIL from being reversed, Washington and its allies in the Gulf must continue engaging their partners in Iraq and Syria when it comes to finding solutions to the problems that initially birthed ISIL.
- With interests in preventing Salafist-jihadist groups from using Yemen as a base for terrorist operations across the world that target U.S. citizens and interests, the U.S. will need to continue engaging the UAE and other Gulf states on counterterrorism efforts in Yemen.
- In 2021, the Middle East is set to experience massive shifts as unresolved conflicts in Libya, Syria, Yemen and other areas continue fueling chaotic instability. Engaging the Gulf monarchies to address these crises, rather than retreating from the region, will serve U.S. national interests on the international stage.
- A major challenge for the Biden administration will be to lower tensions with Iran while addressing the concerns of Washington's GCC partners.

## Acknowledgements

*ASP would like to express a special thank you to Sarah Forland for her assistance in editing this report. ASP would also like to thank the Embassy of Qatar for its support of this research.*

## Introduction

The Persian Gulf is the strategic hub of the Middle East. The U.S. has key security and geopolitical interests that make access to the Persian Gulf region a critical national security priority. While some argue that the U.S., now an energy-independent power, needs to extricate itself from both the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, a total withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members would bode poorly for long-term stability and security in the Gulf, the Middle East, and the rest of the world. It is in Washington's interest to maintain a military presence, even if a lighter one, embedded within the security architecture of the Gulf.



GCC map via Furfur and Ham105; Wikimedia.

This report makes the case against a total U.S. retreat from its deep partnerships and alliances with the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Countries are increasingly interconnected and security threats are transnational; officials in Washington should remain engaged with the Gulf monarchies that have been close partners to the U.S. for decades.

## Looking Beyond Iran—A Strategic Partnership with the GCC

Even if the U.S. is independent from Gulf oil and gas, a relationship with the U.S. remains the security cornerstone for all GCC states. This gives Washington tremendous leverage in relation to not only these countries, but also in relation to all other powers in the world (China, India, etc.) which depend on the Gulf's energy resources. To retreat from its role as the guarantor of security in the Gulf would only invite the U.S.'s geopolitical adversaries, like China and Russia, to play a more decisive role in the sub-region's defense landscape. With stability in the Gulf so closely connected to stability worldwide, such a development would severely weaken Washington's hand on a global scale. Beijing, Moscow, and other capitals have already exploited wedges in U.S.-GCC relations over human rights. A withdrawal would invite even more opportunities to capitalize on and accelerate the perceived decline of the U.S. as a power.

Moreover, the notion that the U.S. is independent of foreign oil can be misleading. While the U.S. became a net exporter of energy in 2019, global instability, particularly in energy producing regions, can still jolt the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup> After all, the oil market is global in nature. In truth, "Energy security comes from being more, not less, connected with the rest of the world."<sup>2</sup> The 2019 drone attacks targeting Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil processing plant and the Khurais oil field underscore this point.<sup>3</sup> The episode resulted in the greatest daily increase in oil prices seen in years, harming American consumers.

The U.S. must deal with perceptions of what constitutes the Iranian threat to regional stability. To be effective, Washington must take seriously these states' concerns about Tehran's regional foreign policy and should coordinate U.S. actions with other actors in the Middle East, particularly Iran's Arab neighbors in the Gulf. Although some Gulf Arab officials have a tendency to exaggerate and overhype aspects of the Iranian threat, Washington should not dismiss their views. It is important to understand that events like the Abqaiq-Khurais attacks on Saudi Arabia only further reinforce Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's perceptions of Tehran as an existential security threat.



The recently-ended blockade by the Quartet of Arab states, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE against GCC member Qatar demonstrates how differing intra-GCC perspectives also become a form of self-sabotage. One of the apparent reasons for the 2017-21 blockade was foreign policy differences over Iran, as Qatar chose to independently prioritize its own strategic policy objectives, even if they did not allegedly align with other GCC countries.<sup>4</sup>

Despite efforts during the blockade to apply economic pressure on Qatar, the country only became more independent of the GCC, diversifying its economy particularly in terms of food security.<sup>5</sup> The Quartet of Arab states ended its blockade in early 2021 partially in response to the renewed potential of re-entering the Iran nuclear deal under the Biden administration. Qatar's bilateral relationships with other GCC members and neighbors are now in a stage of ongoing repair.

While Washington's interests will not always align with those of all GCC states, it should be free to pursue a foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran that suits American (as opposed to Saudi or Emirati) interests. From issues in the Middle East to Africa, as well as the rise of China and Russia, the U.S. and its friends in the Gulf will have different perspectives and priorities.

A major challenge for the Biden administration will be to engage Tehran diplomatically while addressing the concerns of Washington's GCC partners. The Biden administration should find ways to engage Tehran constructively without allowing this to harm Washington's relations with U.S.-friendly Gulf monarchies.

Among the six GCC states, there will be differing views on the U.S. approach to Iran in 2021. Qatar's work to de-escalate tensions in the region and support a return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has made it a key bilateral U.S. partner within the GCC for constructively engaging Tehran.<sup>6</sup> Qatar's longtime stance is for Gulf nations to enter dialogue with Iran. It has also offered itself as a facilitator in any potential Biden administration-Iran negotiations.

This underscores Qatar's ongoing role as a prominent regional mediator.<sup>7</sup> Due to Qatar's unique standing, it has been able to serve as an important mediator in various conflicts. Most recently, in February 2020, it was Qatar which sealed an historic peace agreement<sup>8</sup> between the U.S. government and the Taliban<sup>9</sup>. Previous examples of Qatar's successes in mediation include its role in facilitating the Doha Agreement to stem conflict in Lebanon after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the 2007-2008 peace agreement between the Yemen government and Houthi rebels, and Qatar's facilitation of the 2010 cease-fire agreement between the Sudanese government and various rebels in the Darfur region.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Qatar's bilateral relationships with the U.S., Iran, and as a GCC member also puts it in a special position to assist with facilitating dialogue and negotiations from within the region.

As the U.S. joins Iran in Vienna for talks aimed at reviving the JCPOA, the intermediaries currently include the UK, France, and Germany, with diplomats from Russia and China also attending.<sup>11</sup> However, Saudi Arabia, an original opponent of the JCPOA, has recently expressed support for the revived deal and urged expanded talks to include other regional states, such as GCC members.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to emphasize that Iran is not the only challenge the U.S. faces in the Middle East. Focusing excessively on Iran can lead to dangerous outcomes. When viewing challenges in the region through a lens that is strictly Iran-centric, the U.S. can find itself turning a blind eye to other security threats. For example, the Islamic State (ISIL) and other Sunni extremist forces in Iraq and Syria represent grave dangers to the entire Middle East and require strong cooperation between Washington and GCC members to address.

Increasingly climate change, and associated environmental threats such as rising temperatures, water scarcity, desertification and food insecurity resulting from famine frame a joint call for mitigating action between the Biden administration and the countries of the GCC. Unresolved conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya as well as the need for a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict require ongoing effort. Economic crisis and instability in countries like Iraq, Jordan and Egypt also bode ill for the goal of security and stability.

## Fighting ISIL in Iraq and Syria

Throughout the Trump administration, American Iraq policy became increasingly centered on the White House quest to counter the expansion and consolidation of Tehran's regional influence. From a security standpoint this did not serve U.S. interests well. The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran in Iraq further strained the U.S.-led counter-ISIL campaign (Operation Inherent Resolve). Ultimately ISIL became a major benefactor of Trump's anti-Iranian agenda.

Highlighting this, in early 2020, Retired Colonel Ketti Davison stated, "The counter-Da'esh mission is truly at risk, not just in the short term."<sup>13</sup> Shortly after the assassination of Iran's Major General Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, U.S. and Iraqi forces had to divert attention and resources away from the anti-ISIL (Da'esh) campaign to address the new instability that followed the Soleimani killing. As Davison put it, "It's hard to see how we can stay on the offensive with our Iraqi partners to defeat Da'esh in this kind of circumstance."<sup>14</sup>

On January 5, 2020, the U.S. military released the following statement about Operation Inherent Resolve: "Repeated rocket attacks over the last two months by elements of Kata'ib Hezbollah have caused the death of Iraqi Security Forces personnel and a U.S. civilian. As a result, we are now fully committed to protecting the Iraqi bases that host Coalition troops. This has limited our capacity to conduct training with partners and to support their operations against Daesh and we have therefore paused these activities, subject to continuous review."<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, since January 2020, there has been a notable uptick in ISIL attacks in Iraq and Syria, evidencing ISIL's intentions and abilities to continue unleashing violence.<sup>16</sup> Although the U.S.-led military coalition destroyed the Caliphate's power as a state apparatus, the remnants of ISIL in both Iraq and Syria remain determined to usurp control of land, including territories where population centers and natural resources are located. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction of U.S. forces from the theater, security conditions in Iraq have only deteriorated further, as demonstrated by prison breaks and an increase in deadly attacks and movement of ISIL terrorists across international borders.<sup>17</sup>

Determined to prevent insecurity from spilling from Iraq into Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other GCC states, officials in countries like Kuwait see it in their interest to invest in Iraq's stability by lending support to Baghdad as the Iraqi government copes with a resurgent ISIL, low oil prices, high unemployment, street protests, and the hard-hitting COVID-19 pandemic. With strong ties to many international institutions, Kuwait pledged funds and other resources to Iraq and raised funds from international donors. Like other Gulf countries, it is supportive of GCC efforts to wean Iraq from energy dependencies on Iran.<sup>18</sup>

Kuwait's role as a stabilizing influencer in Iraq is illustrative of the Gulf country's approach to regional crises which the Kuwaitis have sought to defuse over the years. As a stable country surrounded by larger neighbors, Kuwait is an important state actor for stability in a tumultuous region. Since its liberation in 1991, Kuwait has relied heavily on the U.S. for its security and established a close defense alliance. As officials in Washington seek to pursue their goals in Iraq without having to (re)commit large U.S. ground forces, it will be critical for the Biden administration to work closely with regional partners like Kuwait. These countries have stakes in Iraq's future and can coordinate actions across the GCC to help Iraq stabilize and overcome threats posed by ISIL and other extremists seeking to sow hatred and sectarian violence across the country.

ISIL also has remnants in Syria. These armed extremists continue to be a grave security threat to the region and beyond. In order to fight these terrorists, in mid-2020 the U.S. maintained a force of 500-600 troops in eastern Syria where they conducted operations against ISIL in coordination with local Kurdish groups, including the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG)-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>19</sup> As ISIL continues waging attacks in areas which the Syrian government recaptured at various junctures in the Syrian civil war (2011-present) as well as others currently under SDF control, the U.S. and GCC states share concerns about an ISIL insurgency gaining momentum in 2021. By virtue of geographic proximity to other states, the potential growth of militant Salafist-jihadist forces in Iraq could endanger Jordan, one of the GCC's most important neighbors and strategic allies.

To prevent hard-won gains against ISIL from being reversed, Washington and its allies in the Gulf must continue engaging their partners in Iraq and Syria when it comes to finding solutions to the problems that initially birthed ISIL (state collapse, economic despair, failure of governments to provide for their citizens, high sectarian contentions, etc.). This will require moving beyond concepts of military victory and instead to diplomacy and a strong embrace of multilateral approaches to international crises. A unilateral foreign policy in the Middle East that is narrowly and excessively centered around countering Iran is not conducive to achieving U.S. objectives.

The threat of terrorism from Iraq or Syria poses a threat to all in countries in the Gulf, and continued collaboration on security issues is vital to preventing an ISIL re-emergence in the region. Qatar, where the Al Udeid base is home to the largest U.S. military presence in the region, as well as CENTCOM and the U.S. air operations center in the Gulf – Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), was a key defense determinant in Operation Inherent Resolve. This example of Qatari-U.S. burden-sharing also future-proofs U.S. security interests in the region.

While President Biden has promised to extricate America from 'forever wars' in the Middle East, recently announcing the complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021,<sup>20</sup> his administration is also tasked with addressing remnants of ISIL in Iraq and Syria and questions about the fate of ISIL members taken as prisoners as well as the generation of young and brainwashed children who received an education in the "Caliphate." To adequately address the lingering threats posed by ISIL, the U.S. will need to work with countries around the world, particularly allies in the Middle East like GCC members.

## Yemen

In Yemen, a U.S.-backed Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels has been raging since March 2015. Yet this is only one of a number of conflicts currently occurring in Yemen. Washington's own 'war on terror' targets Salafist-jihadist groups—namely al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIL's local franchises. This U.S. 'war on terror' against AQAP and ISIL is mostly unrelated to Riyadh's war against Iranian-backed insurgents in Sana'a and other parts of northern Yemen and has far graver implications for U.S. national security.

There is no denying that extremist groups in Yemen pose a threat to U.S. national security. The attempted terrorist attack of December 25, 2009, in which AQAP trained and armed a Nigerian man, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, to carry out a suicide attack on a Detroit-bound commercial flight coming from Amsterdam, highlighted this.<sup>21</sup>

Although USCENTCOM claims that the U.S. military has not carried out any strikes against Yemen-based terrorist groups since June 2019, other sources have reported subsequent clandestine military actions taken by the U.S. against such extremist forces in the impoverished and war-torn country. For example, in February 2020, the U.S. purportedly waged a "counterterrorism operation" that targeted Abdullah al-Maliki, who allegedly had ties to the Saudi national who carried out the Naval Air Station Pensacola shooting on December 6, 2019.<sup>22</sup>

In its operations against AQAP and ISIL in Yemen, the U.S. has worked closely with the UAE. In fact, American-Emirati cooperation in Yemen is largely responsible for building up Abu Dhabi's reputation in Washington as a special partner for the U.S. in fighting against extremist groups. In March 2019, the UAE conducted a U.S.-supported rescue operation which saved Danny Lavone Burch, a U.S. citizen working as an engineer at a Yemeni state oil company prior to being taken hostage by an al-Qaeda-linked faction.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Qatar has participated in delivering humanitarian aid to Yemen through UN agencies.<sup>24</sup>

Biden has vowed to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen, which is a politically popular position in Washington.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the administration will still need to focus on the War on Terror in Yemen as al-Qaeda and ISIL-affiliated terrorist groups continue to pose a threat to the U.S. For the U.S. to continue its campaign against global terror networks, it will not be possible for Washington to take its eye off Yemen. Naturally, as GCC states share borders with Yemen and have, in various ways, been involved in the country's turmoil over the years, the U.S.-friendly Gulf states will always play a role in Washington's Yemen foreign policy. With interests in preventing Salafist-jihadist groups from using Yemen as a base for terrorist operations across the world that target U.S. citizens and interests, the U.S. will need to continue engaging the UAE and other Gulf states on counterterrorism efforts in Yemen.



Yemeni children playing in the rubble of buildings destroyed in an air raid. Via Peter Biro and EU Civil and Humanitarian Aid / Flickr.

## Meeting Challenges Through Engagement

In 2021, the Middle East is set to experience massive shifts as unresolved conflicts in Libya, Syria, Yemen and other areas continue fueling chaotic instability. There is potential for the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the land near and in Nagorno-Karabakh to further internationalize and spill over into other countries, adding more turmoil to the Middle East that could become increasingly relevant to Gulf monarchies and their geopolitical positions in relation to the Caucasus, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. In addition, while the blockade against Qatar was lifted so diplomatic and economic relations could resume, underlying tensions that fueled the blockade remain below the surface with the potential to resurface and worsen. Washington's relations with GCC members will have to adjust and adapt to new realities shaped by new crises. Bilaterally, the relationships between the Gulf states are changing in response to the three-year blockade against Qatar and the nation's resulting growth in independence from the coalition.

Within GCC states, populations are changing in significant ways. The concept of citizenship is evolving, as seen by the introduction of income tax to the Gulf. The events of 2011 which unfolded in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, demonstrate that the winds of change from the "Arab Spring" are fully capable of blowing into the wealthy GCC states. Biden, who accused Trump of failing to make human rights a pillar of his foreign policy, has promised to take a harder stance on Saudi Arabia regarding its human rights record and its role in Yemen. Naturally, Gulf governments will not welcome pressure, or even mild criticism, as they see an encroachment on their sovereign rights as independent countries. However, their populations may demand change. Human rights are hardly the only area where disagreement will likely emerge between the Biden administration and Gulf monarchies.



Within the Gulf sub-region, questions about U.S.-Iran relations could lead to greater friction between Washington and members of the GCC nervous about the potential consequences of Biden's administration shifting away from Trump's "maximum pressure" agenda. As the Biden administration seeks to lower tensions with Iran, it will simultaneously need to address the legitimate concerns of GCC states about Iran's malign activities. This is a tall order and is only possible if the U.S. can ensure a healthy dialogue between officials in Washington and their counterparts in the Gulf, especially at times in which the Biden White House and some leaders in the GCC will not see eye to eye.

On Iran-related issues, the Biden administration joined European partners in offering to start talks with Tehran over restarting the JCPOA.<sup>26</sup> Currently the nations are at an impasse as the Biden administration has stated that it does not intend to lift certain sanctions imposed by the Trump administration targeting various Iranian



Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper meets with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs Dr. Khalid bin Muhammad Al-Attiyah, in 2020. DoD photo.

sectors until Iran is in compliance with JCPOA, with Iran refusing those terms. For some Gulf countries, Biden easing the pressure on Iran will constitute a first step in changing U.S. policy on Iran but may not be sufficient in and of itself. Such countries were among others, such as the UK and France that expressed concern about the Trump Administration leaving the JCPOA in May 2018. This is because such countries viewed the JCPOA as a diplomatic landmark that would bode positively for Gulf stability in the long haul. Qatar had even gone so far as to offer mediation between Iran and the U.S. to assist in restarting negotiations. Some GCC countries—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—officially welcomed the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA. This reflected

their negative views of the accord from the beginning.<sup>27</sup> The Bahrainis, Saudis, and Emiratis appear nervous about the Biden administration striking a compromise with Tehran that could return to the U.S. and Iran to a détente or partial thaw and are thus seeking greater participation in any negotiations between Tehran and Washington.

Another likely source of strain on relations between the Biden Administration and some GCC members is the question about the Syrian government's legitimacy. With the UAE and Bahrain having re-normalized relations with Damascus in late 2018, Abu Dhabi is working to reintegrate President al-Assad's regime into the Arab League and wider communities of Sunni Arab nations—many of which sought to isolate Damascus after the "Arab Spring" uprising of 2011 slid Syria into a more than decade-long war. While the Biden administration has yet to articulate its plans to address Syria, it is likely to continue Trump's policies of refusing to recognize the legitimacy of a regime in Damascus headed by President al-Assad. The Biden administration may need to work more closely with Turkey to weaken al-Assad—particularly in Idlib. In contrast to the UAE, the U.S. will not recognize the Syrian government as a potential ally or partner in the fight against ISIL. A challenge for U.S.-UAE relations in the post-Trump period will stem from these different positions on Syria and other conflicts in the region, too. This includes Libya, where Abu Dhabi has not only strongly backed General Khalifa Haftar—a warlord whom the U.S. government does not recognize as a legitimate Libyan leader—but also repeatedly broken UN arms embargoes.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond these conflicts, the climate change crisis will increasingly pose a risk to the stability and well-being of the region through desertification, water scarcity, and rising sea levels. Working with GCC members to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and transition the region to a greener future should remain a key point of collaboration between the United States and the Gulf states. Some states are already taking action to prepare for and mitigate the impact of climate change. The UAE has integrated climate mitigation into its national development strategy with the National Climate Change Plan of Action 2017- 2050.<sup>29</sup> Qatar's National Vision 2030 centers on climate considerations and outlines the nation's long-term plans to diversify its economy and move away from dependence on fossil fuels.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, the Biden administration must be patient when dealing with these challenges that will create complications in U.S.-GCC relations through the remainder of 2021 and beyond. Yet engaging the Gulf monarchies to address these crises, rather than retreating from the region, will serve U.S. national interests on the international stage. The U.S. will always have interests in the energy-rich and strategically vital Gulf, given the sub-region's importance to the wider Islamic world and global economy. In early April 2021, when U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, attended the Regional Dialogue for Climate Action he reemphasized the Biden Administration's commitment to an international approach to addressing climate change.<sup>31</sup> Working with GCC states will be integral to effectively addressing climate change and mitigating its impact on the region.

Although America's "endless wars" in the Middle East are rightly criticized on many grounds, the U.S. could and should remain committed to helping GCC states maintain their security, stability, and peace. These countries are important players in the international arena and maintaining them as close allies and partners will require continued U.S. engagement and further deepening of defense and security partnerships and cooperation through bilateral and multilateral forums.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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