CONCLUSION

Conflict and cooperation have come to stay as permanent dynamics in the Persian Gulf region. Both of these are, in fact, complementary to each other than opposites. Issues concerning cooperation have been the source of new differences, causing strains in the relations between two states or more. For instance, the smaller states have always been apprehensive of Saudi domination, both political and economic, through the GCC. Hence, their enthusiasm to participate in the grouping has been marked with caution.

Very often these countries have been found to send positive signals to the countries regarded as common threats: Iran and Iraq. The main objective of this policy of the smaller states is to placate the hostile powers and offset the Saudi paternalism. This indicates that they do not consider the existing mechanism of regional cooperation a fool-proof safety valve against national security threats. In fact, they have evolved their policy towards the GCC in the backdrop of their relations with Iran and Iraq.

UAE did not try to score points at Iran’s cost over the three disputed islands by extending full support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. It was the Arab country Iran had the best relations with, during the war. Iran’s relations Saudi Arabia and other actors in the GCC were rather hostile in constrast.

The call to induct Iran or Iraq into the GCC has also come from the smaller member-states of the region. Qatar advocated for the induction of Iran into the post-Persian Gulf war security set up. Qatar was also the first country to have decided to normalize relations with Iraq after the latter’s withdrawal from the region. The latter issue invited severe criticism from Saudi and Kuwaiti governments. Borderskirmishes with Saudi Arabia in 1992, prompted Qatar to threaten to withdraw from the GCC. The disenchantment with Saudi Arabia before the border skirmishes started would have also directly or indirectly determined Qatar government’s decision or indecision to bid farewell to the GCC.

However, conflicts amongst member countries themselves and those with countries outside the GCC have also spurred cooperation. ‘Common threat perception’ has been the most important factor in convincing the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to freeze the disputes among themselves if not to settle it once and for all. Without going into the details whether the GCC was the direct corollary of the Iran-Iraq war or not, one cannot deny the fact that the War helped the GCC grow. It at the least turned the GCC into a security grouping even if not as formidable as warranted. In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait the member-states decided to give it more teeth by both, strengthening the common defense network and seeking to involve Egypt and Syria (also Iran by some countries) into it.

If the cooperation in the region has been only a little more than half-hearted, conflicts in the region have, by and large been little less than of threatening dimensions. This may sound strange but given the fact that only two of the scores of regional disputes have graduated into a war, one might feel to approve this contention. The Iran-Iraq and the Persian Gulf wars, the former due to its longevity and the latter because of its implication for region, tend to give an impression that the region as a whole has been conflict-prone.
This is true to some an extent. But an important aspect of regional politics should not go unrecognized. That is, part of the Arab peninsular region which is included in the Persian Gulf region has remained peaceful particularly in view of the fact that there are several conflicts still existing to be resolved. The Iran-Iraq war was a factor contributing to the subsiding of inter-state conflicts in that region. In the Persian Gulf crisis the Arab peninsular countries were the party to the dispute. But at the same time, the Iraqi invasion is said to have prevented the eruption of various boundary disputes which was feared to have taken place in the aftermath of the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

The coming to the fore of Qatari-Saudi dispute after about a year of the defeat of Iraq substantiates this contention. Cracks have even begun appearing in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait over the issue of oil quota. The latter demands that since it is a special case, it should not be subjected to the production quota regulations. Saudi Arabia, which had led the Arab opposition to Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, does not sympathise with the Kuwaiti government’s plea. Moreover the democratization in Kuwait has also been resented by Saudi Arabia as it fears that it would indeed have a spill over effect. It would not be out of place to mention that the differences over political reforms in Kuwait have come up in the background of the demonstration of an extraordinary cooperation in preserving the oneness of their political systems by the GCC countries in the 80s.

The extent of the role of external powers in abetting as well as resolving conflicts and their contribution to the process of cooperation in the region have been less than what was expected. This must not be confused with their involvement with a particular state or a group of states in ordinary circumstances. For, ‘bilateralism’ has determined the superpowers’ active involvement in the region in ordinary circumstances. But, the conflicts and cooperation in the Persian Gulf have been the outcome of interplay of typically regional forces. For instance, the border disputes in the Persian Gulf are entrenched in the historical and geographical dynamics of that area. The intricacies involved in these disputes limited the superpowers’ scope in preventing their eruption or in their resolution. For instance, the US allies in the region can not compromise the issues which are directly related to their sovereignty on the excuse that they belong to same power bloc. The US at best can get itself assured that it would use its leverage to let these disputes remain subsided. Similarly, Iraq did not pay heed to the Soviet Union’s advice to refrain from attacking Iran and invading Kuwait. This was because the objective behind Iraqi attempts was purely regional i.e. the regional ambitions. So much so, that Saddam became blind to the international reaction.

Cooperation in the Persian Gulf has been an attempt to avoid total identification with a superpower ally if not to lessen dependence on it. the GCC countries’ dependence on the US is, as far as the security issues are concerned, almost total, yet that organization can not be termed a brainchild of the US as was the case with CENTO. It is not all true that the US itself avoids becoming part of a regional grouping in Persian Gulf. It tried to establish an informal group, known as strategic consensus, of allies under its leadership. It would not be averse to have a similar one in the present circumstances. After fighting from the Arab soil a war against an Arab country the fears of an anti-US backlash from the Arab people in case of US over
involvement allies are removed.

The way the US is consolidating its strategic presence in the region after the end of the Persian Gulf war and the way it has coaxed its allies to give their stamp of approval to Israel-PLO accord further shows that it has finally discounted that fear. Yet the US also did not figure in the GCC countries’ aborted bid to form a West Asia wide security organization after the Persian Gulf war. Even in economic spheres, the protectionist tendencies are increasing in the GCC countries. Faced with the prospects of the exhaustion of oil, they are demanding technology transfer from the US and the West in exchange for oil. It seems that the oil rich Arab countries of the Persian Gulf shall not provide oil at a price as palatable as in the past, except in the interests of national security in a crisis period, in order to capitalize on the increasing demand of the Persian Gulf oil in the near future and in their drive to earn maximum from oil before it exhausts.

As far as the future of the conflicts and cooperation in the Persian Gulf is concerned, it is safer to refrain from predicting. The defeat of Iraq will discourage the ambitious regional states from repeating Saddam’s folly. But this self-restraint will be practiced so long as the US continues to maintain a unipolar world order (would it be able to do so and how long if so is very unlikely to predict). Once and if multipolarism sets in, the regional countries may flare up those very unresolved disputes which have formed the alibis in previous battles fought for regional domination. Thus, the greatest danger to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf are unsettled disputes. The acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by Iran, and Iraq having not ceased to be a threat to the regional countries barring Iran, and Saudi Arabia also trying to join the bandwagon by importing CSS-II missiles from China, a ‘War for Domination’ may take the stage in the region sooner than later.

The chances of cooperation involving all the regional countries are remote. Of course, the GCC is not at all threatened from within, though the pace of the cooperation may remain slow and achievements a few only, but it seem to continue to be a misnomer as neither the member-states would want both Iran and Iraq or either of the two inducted into it, nor can the two countries join one regional organization or tolerate either’s presence in the GCC.