

# The Gulf Navigates a Multipolar World

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Brief Analysis

## Amid global uncertainty, Gulf states are seeking to strike a delicate balance between old and new partners.

**T**he Russian-Ukrainian war—and the long list of potential global conflicts awaiting their turn in Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Kuril Islands, North Korea, and Iran—represents a strategic wake-up call for countries all over the world, suggesting that the international order after this war and potential others will not be as it was before. A multipolar order has begun to appear on the horizon, prompting countries to reevaluate their economic accounts and political alliances. Indeed, nations will have to redefine their geopolitical interests in order to adapt and be self-sufficient and stable amid complex global crises with no obvious endpoints and no clear, identifiable, or controllable consequences.

In the Gulf Arab states, such reevaluations will be increasingly complex considering the current geopolitical developments. Will the alliance with the United States continue to be sufficient to achieve the interests of Gulf states? Is there an urgent need to diversify alliances with rising powers like China, Russia, and others in the fields of security and energy? Or is there a third option: managing a sensitive and complex balance between U.S. interests on the one hand, and Chinese and Russian interests on the other? Identifying a path forward is of the utmost importance, not least because the Gulf states produce 40 percent of the world's total energy.

Before examining the Gulf's options, however, there are several key developments that must be highlighted as factors in the Gulf states' assessments of their interests and alliances. First, the Gulf states cannot ignore the signs of a major international strategic alliance forming via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, including Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian countries. Likewise, the Gulf states are aware of the importance of Russia and China's roles in reining in Iran, especially if the nuclear agreement ultimately falls apart and Iran shifts to a North Korean model in the region.

In the same context, the Gulf states remain incapable of adopting a consistent foreign policy because their

international positions remain largely undefined amid the political divisions in Washington. The contradictions and fluctuations resulting from repeated changes in administration in Washington have had negative repercussions on the U.S.-Gulf partnership, often leaving the Gulf states in the dark as to how successive U.S. governments will view their policies.

Moreover, the repercussions of the Ukrainian war remain unclear and unpredictable in terms of international security and the economy, especially regarding global energy prices. As a result, the Gulf states are understandably unwilling to give up big oil customers like China, nor disregard China's new global role and the scale of its influence in the Middle East and the global economy, represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Gulf states are also aware of the importance of the BRICS alliance between the fastest growing economies in the world: Russia, China, Brazil, India, and South Africa.

Given the current international conditions, Gulf decision-makers are faced with many options for defining a new strategic approach in the coming years. The diversification of the Gulf states' international partnerships seems an appropriate choice given the current context. Yet the nature and content of that diversification remains an important issue in need of resolution considering the Gulf's relationship with the United States. Gulf countries can either proceed with strategic partnerships with China, Russia, and other emerging powers and take subsequent damage to their relationship with the United States in stride, or they can establish tactical and contingent partnerships with these powers while simultaneously maintaining the strategic level of their partnership with Washington.

Only the latter option allows for the balancing of geopolitical interests between the United States on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, avoiding the difficulty of convincing Washington of the utility of developing strategic partnerships with China and Russia. By establishing tactical and contingent partnerships with China and Russia that do not rise to the strategic level, the second option will be more acceptable to Washington and will be viable for Russia and China, who understand the strategic depth of the U.S.-Gulf relationship.

If they adopt the second option, the Gulf states could become a channel of communication, understanding, and balance between U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests on various global issues, most notably energy and trade. In particular, the UAE could play an important global role in managing the balance of global interests, at least in the Middle East, by building on the vital international role it already plays. Saudi Arabia can also play a greater role in managing this balance if it develops its research and diplomatic apparatus and adopts a clear, defined, and precise policy vision. In addition, Qatar and Oman can also manage complex issues between the United States, China, and Russia given their long experience in complex negotiations. Case in point, Qatar successfully brokered an agreement between the Taliban and the United States in 2020, while Oman successfully brokered several deals between Iran and the United States, including the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Of course, in order to achieve this goal, specific limits on developing Russian and Chinese ties must first be established by the Gulf states through which they can manage a delicate and precise balance between U.S. and Russian-Chinese interests. In order to achieve this balance, for example, defense cooperation between the Gulf states and Russia and China must not rise to the level of a mutual defense treaty, nor affect the U.S. weapons program in the Gulf states, especially its missile shield systems. Cooperation between the Gulf states and Russia and China must also not harm or directly affect U.S. interests or the interests of U.S. allies, especially regarding the energy supply security and Israeli security. To avoid a perceived imbalance, Gulf states must ensure that cooperation with Russia—or even China—doesn't lead to their dominance over the Arab Gulf region, potentially triggering a response from the White House or Congress, and Gulf countries must shun any direct or indirect involvement in Russia's conflicts around the world.

In return, the Gulf states should demand from Washington a clear, defined, and precise policy regarding Middle Eastern issues—a policy free from the inconsistencies and fluctuations produced by alternating Republican or

Democratic administrations. Washington should not intervene to break up long-standing Gulf commitments to other international powers, given the damage to Gulf interests that would result. In this vein, Israel has the potential to play a significant role in bringing together Gulf and U.S. perspectives on certain regional issues given the regional peace agreements with Israel.

Without a doubt, the current international order is going through an important transitional phase that will likely result in a multipolar global reality. If they adopt a common vision, the Gulf states will likely be able to resolve the global energy security crises, regional economic shifts, and any other consequences of the transition to a multipolar world, while keeping the balance between powers like the United States and Russia and China. And if given space to do so, Gulf states could become an indispensable international actor in restoring global security. ❖❖

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