



*Changing Dynamics in Asia-Middle East Relations*

# ASIAN PERCEPTIONS OF GULF SECURITY

Edited by  
Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton



“While the ‘Asianisation of Asia’ continues to spread roots and deepen pan-Asian relations along the axes of energy cooperation, security partnership, trade and investment, and people-to-people exchanges, little concrete and theoretically informed attention has been paid to wider Asian perceptions of West Asia. This magnificent volume is rectifying this and has given us a detailed and well-informed understanding of the key Asian countries’ relations with their West Asian counterparts and the security concerns which underpin their policies.”

– **Prof. Anoush Ehteshami**, Durham University

“As policy and academic interest for Gulf-Asian relations has been on the rise, the project led by Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton comes at a critical time. The angle of their research and the questions addressed in the country-specific case studies will bring new perspectives to a field that has been lacking Asian views – be it from China, Japan, Korea, or Singapore – on the Gulf. The background of the eight contributors should ensure the rigor of the scholarship. At the same, the variety of their nationalities is a good indicator of the diversity of views.”

– **Jean-Loup Samaan, PhD**, Senior Research Fellow,  
Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore



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# Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security

Gulf stability is coming to play a larger role in the foreign policy calculus of many states, but the evolving role of Asian powers is largely under-represented in the International Relations literature. This volume addresses this gap with a set of empirically rich, theory driven case studies written by academics from or based in the countries in question. The underlying assumption is not that Asian powers have already become important security actors in the Gulf, but rather that they perceive the Gulf as a region of increasing strategic relevance. How will leaders in these countries adjust to an evolving regional framework? Will there be coordinated efforts to establish an Asian-centered approach to Gulf stability, or will Asian rivalries make the region a theater of competition? Will US–China tensions force alignment choices among Asian powers? Will Asian states balance, bandwagon, hedge, or adopt some other approach to their Gulf relationships? These questions become even more important as the western boundaries of Asia increasingly come to incorporate the Middle East. The book will appeal to scholars and students in the fields of International Relations, Security Studies, and International Political Economy, as well as area specialists on the Gulf and those working on foreign policy issues on each of the Asian countries included. Professionals in government and non-government agencies will also find it very useful.

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## **Changing Dynamics in Asia-Middle East Relations**

Series editor: Jonathan Fulton

A number of political and economic initiatives in recent years underscore the surge in relations across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region. The USA's Indo-Pacific strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's Look East and Look West strategies, and several less formal but no less important state-to-state relationships all indicate that ties across Eurasia are growing. Economic relations between Persian Gulf states and various Asian energy markets have diversified to the point that trade, investment and finance are complemented with diplomatic and security cooperation. Soft power initiatives are building relations across non-elite levels, creating familiarity in language, culture, and religion. At the same time, increased interactions present potential for tensions as competition between Asian states plays out in the Middle East, and Middle Eastern rivalries affect the trajectory of Asian states' regional involvement.

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**Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton**



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# 1 Introduction

*Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton*

In 2019 we published *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, a co-edited book that analyzed the approaches of extra-regional powers toward the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states.<sup>1</sup> Our focus was not limited to Asian countries in that book, instead looking at how a wide range of countries were pursuing multifaceted relations with a set of countries that play important roles in the global economy, most notably in energy markets but also in trade, investment, and finance. When that economic significance is combined with a geographic location that serves as a Eurasian and Indian Ocean hub connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Persian Gulf makes for a fascinating subregion from which to consider emerging geopolitical trends.

One of the key themes of that book was a looming order transition in the Gulf. As a result of shifting distribution of power at the systemic level, with the US relative power and influence decreasing, the ordering principles that had explained international politics in the Gulf since the end of the Cold War were changing. Because of this, we anticipated a deeper level of engagement in strategic concerns from both Gulf leaders and a range of extra-regional states with interests in the Gulf.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, this analysis seems increasingly accurate. Writing this chapter in early 2022, it is surprising how much distance there is between the leaders of the GCC countries – especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – and their counterparts in the US. An oft-repeated refrain, for instance, is that “the United States is becoming increasingly less reliable as a long term partner”<sup>3</sup> even though there is ample evidence of continuing US interests in the region.<sup>4</sup> This distance is frequently attributed to preferences or attitudes of US political leaders such as when the Senate voted in 2018 to end support for the Saudis in Yemen, but as Quilliam noted in 2020,

irrespective of president, the US has embarked upon a slow and inexorable withdrawal from the Gulf. The change is symptomatic of a structural shift in the balance of global power, rather than an expression of the proclivities of presidents Obama and Trump.<sup>5</sup>

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During the Biden administration the trend has not reversed. In the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Biden was reportedly unable to reach the Saudi and Abu Dhabi Crown Princes for a telephone meeting to discuss the war's impact on global energy prices; they refused to take his call.<sup>6</sup>

Regional allies and partners have become convinced that the US commitment to the Gulf is soft, and in response have been charting foreign policies that diverge from Washington's on certain issues. The US pullout from Afghanistan in 2021 fed into the belief of US retrenchment from the Middle East,<sup>7</sup> with the UAE's diplomatic advisor to the president and former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash saying,

We will see in the coming period what is going on with regards to America's footprint in the region. I don't think we know yet, but Afghanistan is definitely a test and, to be honest, it is a very worrying test.<sup>8</sup>

It is not simply a matter of signaling. Washington has determined the Indo-Pacific is its priority theater and China is its primary strategic competitor.<sup>9</sup> While the Middle East and North African region is perceived to be less relevant to Washington's foreign and defense policy than at any other point since the late Cold War, the commensurate value of Transatlantic ties has been greatly enhanced as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The inevitable outcome is that Gulf leaders have been diversifying their extra-regional partnerships in response. They have also been in the process of reconsidering regional partnerships and rivalries. Diplomatic normalization between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain is evidence of this, with leaders in each country pursuing regional alignments that support their preferences of regional order.<sup>10</sup> There has even been outreach to Turkey and Iran in line with the widespread perception that tensions of the past decade had reached an unsustainable level. With uncertainty about the direction of US–Gulf relations, regional leaders have been more assertive in pursuing their own approaches to the security issues they face.

Extra-regional countries with interests in the Gulf need to reconsider their approaches to the region as well.<sup>11</sup> US security commitments set the organizing principles of the Gulf throughout the post-Cold War era, and this allowed many countries to develop substantial regional presences dominated by economic opportunities without corresponding security roles. The possibility of US retrenchment changes the logic and cost-benefit calculation for them, and governments and companies in these countries will also have to recalibrate their Gulf policies.

This book examines how the evolving Gulf order affects the regional interests of Asian countries by offering a deep dive into the strategic considerations facing policy-makers in China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, and Pakistan. Each of these countries have deep interests in the Gulf, although there is variation between them, and as such they are vulnerable to the consequences of instability in the Gulf. A regional order transition therefore must be considered seriously, even if reluctantly, among their respective policy communities. Asian countries are major trade partners throughout the Gulf, with China, India, Japan, and South

Korea regularly among the top ten markets for the GCC as well as Iran and Iraq. Of course, energy trade is – and will continue to be – central to this. The tremendous economic growth in Asia over decades has required Gulf hydrocarbons; at the same time, Gulf human resource challenges and acute development needs have required Asian labor, capital, technical knowledge, and contracting. The resulting economic synergy between the Gulf subregion and Asia creates a degree of interdependence that could easily verge on vulnerability particularly if globalization recedes.

Many reading this will point out that the Gulf is already an Asian region to begin with. Both Chinese and Indian governments, for example, refer to it as a part of West Asia. Funabashi's seminal *Foreign Affairs* article from 1993, 'The Asianization of Asia,'<sup>12</sup> discussed the shift in core–periphery dynamics as Asian countries had reached such levels of development that they had come to see each other as primary partners or competitors; Western dominance in Asia, a historical outlier, no longer explained the region's political or economic order. As Gulf and Asian economies have steadily integrated, a growing body of academic work has adopted a more expansive understanding of Funabashi's 'Asianization' framework to explain this deeper engagement.<sup>13</sup>

This volume builds upon that work by addressing how Asian countries consider issues of Gulf security and insecurity in the context of their own interests. This is a topic that has not been studied widely yet, largely because of the dynamics described above. With the exception of Japan, the emergence of Asian countries as major economic actors in the modern Gulf is a recent phenomenon, and throughout much of this period US political, military, and economic dominance established patterns of engagement. Its allies and partners in the GCC cooperated with its allies and partners in Asia, with China seen as a free-rider that was still content to follow the leader. Little research was done on security issues because there was relatively little to study.<sup>14</sup>

We believe this is changing. A new dynamic in the international relations of the Gulf is evident: the arrival of Asian countries as major extra-regional actors. The underlying assumption is not that Asian powers have already become important security actors in the Gulf, but rather than they perceive the Gulf as a region of increasing strategic relevance. This leads us to consider several questions: How have Gulf security considerations informed the foreign policy of Asian countries? How will leaders in Asia adjust to an evolving regional framework? Will Asian rivalries make the region a theater of competition? Can we expect Asian states to balance, bandwagon, hedge, or adopt some other approach to their Gulf relationships? To what extent do their relationships with the US influence their approach to the Gulf? Such questions become all the more important as the western boundaries of Asia increasingly come to incorporate the Middle East.

That is not to underestimate the serious complications inherent in Gulf–Asia relations. As each of the chapters here emphasize, the countries in question face significant domestic political and economic pressures that limit their willingness or ability to play a more robust security role in the Gulf. Among many publics in the countries studied here the Gulf is not perceived as a high priority; pressing

concerns closer to home will always feature more significantly on the agenda. In India and Pakistan, South Asia is of vastly more immediate importance, Singaporeans are preoccupied with Indonesia and Malaysia, and China, Japan, and South Korea have significant challenges within East Asia. In many cases, as is evident throughout this book, these countries see each other as threats in their own regions, limiting the military resources they could divert to the Gulf. A related consideration is the challenging security environment throughout Asia. First and foremost is US–China strategic competition, which presents immediate threats and dilemmas for many Asian countries.<sup>15</sup> Much like in the Gulf, a changing distribution of power in the Asian regional order is underway, and the consequences of this will result in an order transition.<sup>16</sup> Add to this the fragmented political and security landscape of Asia itself; as Michael Cox points out, it “hardly exists as a collective actor.”<sup>17</sup> There is a deep literature featuring optimistic narratives of an Asian Century,<sup>18</sup> but this work often ignores or under-represents the deep-rooted rivalries that have the potential to make for a highly unstable region.<sup>19</sup>

With this book we present a novel analysis of Gulf–Asia relations. This set of empirically rich, theory-driven case studies was written by experts from or based in the Asian countries in question who have deep engagement with the Gulf; their analysis was largely drawn from local sources in multiple relevant languages. The chapters encompass Asian states in different subregions of Asia – South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia – and with different power configurations – middle powers and great powers – in the international system. Cognizant of the heterogeneity of Asia – in terms of territorial and population size, level of economic development, political regime types, attitudes toward great powers, and religious affiliations, among others – we have privileged in-depth country studies over thematic considerations.

In Chapter 2, Jonathan Fulton presents an analysis of the Gulf as a regional security complex in the early stages of an order transition. US hegemony has been the ordering principle of the Gulf since the end of the Cold War, but in recent years America’s military preponderance has been paired with a declining interest in regional leadership. Accurate or not, the resulting perception of a hegemonic retreat will impact the regional policies of all states with interests in the Gulf. For the Asian states studied in this volume, it becomes more complicated as they have to manage their relationships with states in the Gulf within the dual contexts of intra-regional rivalries as well as US–China great power competition.

In Chapter 3, Degang Sun argues that China seeks a zero-enemy policy in the Gulf by building a network of partnerships in order to dilute the US security alliance system. He identifies five pathways that have defined China’s attempts to respond to the Gulf security environment and concludes that these have successfully de-linked the global cold war (US–China rivalry) with the Gulf cold war (Saudi–Iranian confrontation). Consequently, China has, for now, avoided the participation of Gulf states in any potential US-led Gulf strategic alliance targeting China.

The role of the US is also a key consideration in the chapters on Japan and South Korea, both of which are alliance partners of the US. In Chapter 4, Yee-Kuang

Heng examines Japan's attempts to hedge and forge a more independent position from the US in Gulf affairs. Ultimately, he concludes that Japan has been unable to shape the evolving regional security architecture, notably on Iran and the GCC dispute; its security role therefore remains nascent.

In Chapter 5, Haewon Jeong writes about the Republic of Korea's decision to independently deploy the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz. She adopts a securitization framework to explain that the US alliance was merely one of the considerations for the military dispatch. Pressure from domestic stakeholders was also key in shaping the contours of the deployment.

In Chapter 6, Li-Chen Sim references Singapore's strategic culture of 'vulnerability' and its impact on relations with the Gulf. She finds that while concerns about public order in Singapore prompted the initial impetus to engage with the Gulf states in the 21st century, the city-state's interests in economic prosperity and energy security largely mitigated perceptions of Gulf insecurity and instability.

The role of domestic considerations is also reflected in Mudassir Quamar's study on India in Chapter 7. The presence of a large Indian expatriate community in the six GCC countries and Indian dependence on the region for energy security make Gulf (in)security an internal political issue. At the same time, regional tensions and foreign policy responses of friendly and rival powers, including the US and China, inform New Delhi's room for maneuver.

In Chapter 8, Umer Karim presents a study of the interconnected nature of South Asia and the Gulf, using Pakistan–Gulf relations as a framework. He discusses the importance of Islam, elite relations, and military support as factors that contributed to a substantial Pakistani role in the Gulf's security architecture.

In Chapter 9, N. Janardhan considers the prospect of a post-US-led security framework for the Gulf, in which Asian countries are significant partners in a collective security approach. He posits that Gulf countries see Asian powers as important future allies, transitioning from transactional economic actors to agents capable of affecting regional geopolitics.

Going forward, we envision opportunities for an inside-out approach whereby Gulf states and entities at the subnational level weigh in on competition by extra-regional powers to engage them. A companion volume, written by Gulf experts, presenting Gulf perceptions of Asian engagement, would be a welcome addition to the literature on Gulf–Asia relations.

## Notes

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## **2 Asian Powers and a Transitioning Gulf Order**

*Jonathan Fulton*

Regional orders became a more salient topic of study in International Relations with the transition of the international order from Cold War bipolarity to a US-centered unipolarity. As Buzan and Waever wrote, “the regional level is where the extremes of national and global security interplay, and where most of the action occurs.”<sup>1</sup> One important post-Cold War development in regionalism was described by Funabashi as the ‘Asianization’ of Asia: “As Asian nations phase out the special relationships they have had with former colonial powers and integrate with the global economy, they are starting to see neighboring countries as trading partners, providers of investment opportunities and competitors.”<sup>2</sup> Chang has expanded upon this political and economic focus of Asianization, describing a “dramatic intensification of intra-Asian interactions and flows in industrial, financial, demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological spheres.”<sup>3</sup>

A by-product of this has been a broader conceptual approach to Asia, as regions and states across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region (IOR) integrate politically, economically, and culturally. The gradual shift of the global economic center of gravity shows what this means in material terms; located around the mid-North Atlantic Ocean in 1980, it is projected to be squarely between India and China by 2050. Much of global economic growth is coming from Asia, accounting for approximately one-third of global GDP in 2000 and expected to be more than 50% by 2040.<sup>4</sup> States that had been at the periphery of a Western-centered globalization and were therefore of marginal importance to each other have formed dense economic and political networks, giving shape to what some refer to as the Asian century.<sup>5</sup>

Currently the international order is undergoing another transition, from US-led unipolarity to a less centered system that will likely be multipolar.<sup>6</sup> While the systemic consequences of this transition have inspired a large body of analysis, the regional implications are no less important. Regions and subregions across Eurasia and the IOR, long shaped by systemic unipolarity, are increasingly competitive theaters as their own ordering principles begin to shift in response. Perceptions of hegemonic retreat remove restrictions on actors at the regional level, intensifying competition, which in turn affects the foreign policies of extra-regional powers. At the systemic level this is exacerbated by the ‘great power competition’ narrative taking hold in the US, China, and Russia to characterize

their complex relationships. Across Eurasia and the IOR this is made manifest in competing visions of order inherent in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership.<sup>7</sup>

In the Gulf subregion, this transitioning order could have significant consequences. In the West the Gulf has long been perceived as the outer limits of the Middle East–North Africa (MENA), whereas the governments of both China and India have identified it as part of West Asia–North Africa (WANA). This WANA designation reflects a different conceptualization of a region that defies easy geopolitical categorization. Given the Gulf's strategic and economic importance, it features in the foreign policy and energy security strategies of countries far beyond its shores. The Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb are two of the global economy's crucial chokepoints, giving the Arabian Peninsula a geo-strategic weight. With the Indo-Pacific becoming a policy framework for governments and academics, the acknowledgment of this subregion's importance in the north-west IOR makes it conceptually useful to consider the Gulf states within Funabashi's Asianization of Asia. This is consistent with a small but growing body of academic work that has largely focused on the economic implications of Gulf-Asia relations, with energy trade dominating.<sup>8</sup>

Security studies, however, remains under-analyzed,<sup>9</sup> a fact that can largely be attributed to US military preponderance in the Gulf. Deeply entrenched throughout the post-Cold War era, US security commitments to the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its securitized presence in Iraq since 2003 have supported a regional status quo that favors the Gulf monarchies. This has facilitated their deepening engagement with extra-regional states other than the US. As a result, there has been little need for these other extra-regional powers to make substantial contributions to Gulf security, a situation that is not likely to remain sustainable for the long-term. On the one hand, the depth of economic relations and large expatriate populations in the region indicate a need to assume a role in securing those interests. On the other, the perception of a looming US retrenchment, or at least a reduced role, is a motivating factor at the systemic level. A series of tweets in 2019 from President Trump justified this perception:

China gets 91% of its Oil from the Straight [sic], Japan 62%, & many other countries likewise. So why are we protecting the shipping lanes for other countries (many years) for zero compensation. All of these countries should be protecting their own ships on what has always been a dangerous journey. We don't even need to be there in that the U.S. has just become (by far) the largest producer of Energy anywhere in the world!<sup>10</sup>

While the tweets can be dismissed as the personal preferences of the former president, it does reinforce a widespread assumption that the US is reconsidering its role in the Gulf and broader MENA, one that has not changed with President Joe Biden's administration. Consequentially extra-regional powers with deep interests there must recalibrate their own approaches to the Gulf, especially where security issues are concerned.

This chapter sets the stage for the country-specific case studies of this edited volume. It analyzes the Gulf as a regional security complex (RSC) that has historically been shaped by a nexus of regional and systemic pressures. The contemporary Gulf order faces significant challenges at both of those levels, making it a difficult subregion to navigate for Asian powers that have long based their approaches to the Gulf on the foundation of US hegemony. This ordering principle is changing, and as a result the countries studied here – China, India, Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, and South Korea – have to determine how they will go about securing their interests in the Gulf, adopting presences that could either shore up, disrupt, or exit from a fragile regional status quo. It finds that these US allies or partners, not yet ready to pursue independent regional strategies, will continue to support US preferences for Gulf order with bandwagoning approaches. The increasingly hostile bilateral relationship between China and the US, however, means Chinese support for US policies in the Gulf cannot be taken for granted. Rather than a bandwagoner, China is a strategic hedger, developing its regional capabilities in anticipation of a more overtly competitive relationship with the US. The Gulf as a theater of great power competition is another variable that extra-regional states will have to consider in developing their policies toward the Gulf countries.

## **Ordering the Gulf: Regional and Systemic Pressures**

This section analyses the features of Gulf order, beginning with the assertion that it is best understood as an RSC. It then analyzes the Gulf RSC at two levels, the regional and systemic, to emphasize the different factors that leaders of Asian (and other extra-regional) countries must consider while engaging with their counterparts in the Gulf.<sup>11</sup>

Buzan defined an RSC as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.”<sup>12</sup> This is an apt description of the Gulf sub-region, where the eight states “focus intensely on each other and devote the bulk of their security resources to relations with each other and have done so for decades.”<sup>13</sup> Importantly, extra-regional great powers, responding to pressures at the systemic level, may become actors within an RSC, even though the region may not feature significantly in their own direct security concerns.<sup>14</sup> The steady expansion of the US presence in the Gulf is an example of the centrality of an extra-regional power in the Gulf and the impact it can have on regional order.<sup>15</sup> US interests have a major impact on the security and foreign policies of every Gulf country, while Gulf states feature significantly lower on the list of US concerns. The insights from RSC theory are useful here as Gulf states, as discussed below, find their own region especially threatening, and alignments with extra-regional powers have long been a foreign policy strategy, especially for the smaller Arab Gulf monarchies who lack conventional power capabilities when compared with Iran and Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

The most salient source of instability within the Gulf RSC is hostilities between Iran and its Gulf neighbors. This has been a consistent feature since the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was established in 1979 and ideological competition between regime types became prevalent, with post-monarchical Iran attempting to export its revolution to other Gulf states.<sup>17</sup> Iranian dissatisfaction with a MENA status quo supported by the US and favoring its GCC rivals has fueled its support for revisionist non-state actors – Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis – throughout the region. This is perceived as a threat to regime stability among the Gulf monarchies, an especially grave concern given instability across MENA in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The longstanding rivalry between revisionist Iran and the status quo GCC has resulted in a sub-systemic bipolarity, often described as a Middle East cold war.<sup>18</sup> US military preponderance was seen as the factor that prevented escalation to active hostilities, although this began to change during the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran. Suffering economic and political isolation, Tehran adopted a more overtly aggressive approach to its neighbors, most notably with the spectacular drone attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019.

Intra-GCC rivalry is another factor that shapes the regional security environment. Tensions between the Gulf monarchies have always been prevalent but given the common external challenges, they largely remained in the background. This changed with the dramatic crisis that erupted in 2017 between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain on the other, drawing global attention to a rift that had widened in the wake of the Arab uprisings.<sup>19</sup> Qatari support for political Islamist groups put it at odds with the other four, all of which preferred maintaining a pre-uprising status quo that marginalized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Shortly after Qatar was isolated, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced the formation of a bilateral alliance, further emphasizing the fractious nature of the GCC.<sup>20</sup> Kuwait and Oman both pushed for reconciliation but to little effect; the GCC crisis continued until January 2021, when the two sides began what will likely be a long process of reconciliation.

These tensions at the regional level are important considerations for extra-regional actors who must weigh the relative gains of engagement with certain states against the relative costs of alienating a rival. For example, in 2018 Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a state visit to the UAE, where he upgraded the existing bilateral relationship from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest level in China's diplomatic hierarchy. This elevated the UAE to the same level as Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>21</sup> Months later, Qatar's Emir Tamim Al Thani visited Beijing, an occasion that offered the same opportunity to upgrade the Sino-Qatari strategic partnership signed in 2014. Instead, China announced that it wanted to continue developing the relationship through the existing partnership agreement rather than raising Qatar to the same level as its GCC rivals.<sup>22</sup> While it was not made explicit, the implication appears that Beijing recognized that it had more to gain through deeper relations with the UAE rather than with an isolated Qatar.<sup>23</sup>

At the systemic level, the nature of the US presence in the Gulf is the major consideration for extra-regional states. With a deeply militarized presence on the Arabian Peninsula, US preponderance shapes the options available to other states. This began with the articulation of the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which proclaimed,

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>24</sup>

Yet it was not until the post-Cold War period when Kuwait (1991), Bahrain (1991), Qatar (1992), and the UAE (1994) signed defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) with the US that created the actual security architecture that has sustained the current regional order. Oman was an outlier, having signed a facilities access agreement (FAA) in 1980. There are approximately 35,000 US troops in the Gulf, with approximately 13,500 in Kuwait, 8,000 in Qatar, 5,000 in Bahrain, 3,500 in the UAE, 3,000 in Saudi Arabia, and a few hundred in Oman.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the troops, there are substantial military installations throughout the five states. Kuwait hosts US personnel at Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring, Ali Al-Salem Air Base, Shaykh Ahmed al-Jabir Air Base, and Camp Patriot. Bahrain has had a US naval command presence since 1948, although it was not an especially significant one until Central Command was established during the Regan administration and the Bahraini base housed the naval component, NAVCENT. Post-Desert Storm, the onshore command presence was established, and the Fifth Fleet was reconstituted in 1995. All of this is housed at the Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain. This facility has undergone a \$590 million expansion that started in 2010, bringing the total US cost of the facility to approximately \$2 billion.<sup>26</sup> Bahrain's Khalifa bin Salman Port accommodates US aircraft carriers and amphibious ships, its Shaykh Issa Air Base hosts US military aircraft, and it is also home to a facility for US Special Operations Forces.<sup>27</sup> Qatar hosts US Air Force personnel at the Al Udeid air base, which was built at a cost of \$1 billion in the 1990s and has since undergone expansion and enhancement with some US funding.<sup>28</sup> The UAE hosts US military personnel at the Jebel Ali Port; that and other UAE ports collectively host more US naval ships than any ports outside of the US. There are also US troops stationed at the Al Dhafra air base and naval facilities in Fujairah.<sup>29</sup> Oman, under its FAA with the US, provides access to military airfields in Muscat, Thurait, Masirah Island, and Musanah.<sup>30</sup> These DCAs and the FAA have been complemented with significant arms sales, military cooperation, and joint training exercises.<sup>31</sup>

A recurring theme in each of the chapters of this book is that extra-regional states must consider their Gulf relationships in the context of their relationship with the US. As US allies and partners, India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have adopted Gulf policies that align with US preferences and have relied on a

bandwagoning strategy to secure their interests. Their deep ties to the GCC support both their own economic interests and the US-preferred status quo. Their relations with Iran are also shaped by the status of US-Iran relations. After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015, each of these Asian countries looked at Iran as an important untapped market. When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and implemented new sanctions, that short-lived engagement with Iran came to an end, proving that the economic and political benefits of accepting US preferences in the Gulf outweighed potential benefits of forging an independent policy.

Singaporean companies, for example, were advised by the country's Foreign Ministry to heed US unilateral sanctions against Iran, noting that several have received heavy fines for multiple sanctions violations. While Singaporean officials were clear that they are not enforcing US sanctions, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was explicit that companies in Singapore should operate with the knowledge that "we expect companies with dealings with countries subject to unilateral U.S. sanctions will ... make their own calculations and decisions based on how this might impact on their own commercial interests."<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with the response in 2004 from a former Foreign Minister, who, when asked about Singapore support for the US war in Iraq, responded: "we are not pro-US; we are not anti-any country. What we are is that we are pro-Singapore in the sense that ultimately what guides us in our foreign policy is our national interest."<sup>33</sup>

India provides another example. It has been in discussions with the Iranian government to develop Chabahar port since 2003. For New Delhi this project would provide a corridor to reach Afghanistan, Central Asia, and ultimately Russia, representing important export markets and energy sources. The project remained stalled until 2016 after the JCPOA was signed, when there was a brief burst of energy as New Delhi and Tehran anticipated the long-awaited opportunity to develop the project. However, US withdrawal from the JCPOA two years later put India's Chabahar ambitions on hold once again.<sup>34</sup> While India's preference would clearly be to engage with Iran on Chabahar, it has proven unwilling to challenge US leadership despite the costs.

China presents a more complicated case. It is not a US partner or ally but its main strategic competitor, and China has also taken advantage of the US security umbrella to deepen ties to the GCC. It has also consistently complied with US sanctions on Iran, despite offering rhetorical support to the IRI.<sup>35</sup> Despite following US preferences in the Gulf, bandwagoning, which implies support for the hegemon's ordering principles, is a less satisfying explanation of Chinese regional behavior. China certainly has benefited from US preponderance in the Gulf, but increasingly proves unwilling to support it unconditionally.<sup>36</sup> Chinese officials have been outspoken about American approaches to Iran since the US withdrew from the JCPOA and adopted the 'maximum pressure' approach. In a 2019 meeting in Beijing with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shortly after the conclusion of joint naval exercises between China, Russia, and Iran, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said,

the unilateral withdrawal by the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, giving up on its international commitments and [attempts] to exert maximum pressure on Iran are the sources of the current tension arising over the Iranian nuclear issue.<sup>37</sup>

Days later, after the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani, Wang complained that the “dangerous US military operation violates the basic norms of international relations and will aggravate regional tensions and turbulence.”<sup>38</sup> When the US tried to extend the United Nations’ (UN) arms embargo on Iran months later, the Chinese mission to the UN tweeted, “US failed to meet its obligations under Resolution 2231 by withdrawing from #JCPOA. It has no right to extend an arms embargo on Iran, let alone to trigger snapback. Maintaining JCPOA is the only right way moving forward.”<sup>39</sup> In material terms this may not translate into a revisionist approach to the Gulf from China, but it does indicate that the US cannot take Chinese compliance for granted. As the great power competition narrative comes to dominate thinking about the US–China bilateral relationship, a more assertive China is likely to diverge from US preferences in MENA if Chinese leaders believe that their regional interests are no longer secured under the US umbrella.

Another factor that could result in different approaches to the Gulf from Asian countries is the widespread perception that the US is in the process of attempting to reduce its regional role.<sup>40</sup> As described above, its diplomatic and military commitments to Gulf partners and allies remain robust, yet at the same time, political pressure from a public favoring a less active presence in MENA has steadily been building. This is not simply a matter of a public response to unpopular policies; US interests in the region have long been transitioning. Former US Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk argued this point in a 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article, claiming “few vital interests of the U.S. continue to be at stake in the Middle East.”<sup>41</sup> The belief that MENA issues have a direct impact on the US is declining:

There are no more imperiling threats from the Middle East that endanger America’s social life, economic affluence, and political institutions; and so controlling this region as uncontested hegemon is no longer vital to the US position as a global superpower.<sup>42</sup>

Its core MENA interests have long been ensuring MENA energy supplies safely reach global markets, freedom of navigation in and across an important geopolitical region, and contributing to Israeli security. Meeting these interests no longer requires a US hegemonic presence. In terms of energy, America’s emergence as the world’s largest energy producer recalibrates global energy markets. In fact, the dramatic price drop during the 2020 Saudi–Russia ‘oil war’ demonstrates that in energy markets, US and Gulf producers are competitors as well as necessary partners to stabilize oil markets. As far as freedom of navigation, the capacity of other extra-regional powers to play a larger role in maintaining open shipping lanes is increasing, albeit slowly; President Trump’s previously mentioned tweets

underscore why they likely see it as a necessity. The US-led Operation Sentinel is a multilateral consortium of nine countries (Albania, Australia, Bahrain, Britain, Lithuania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US) to “promote maritime stability, ensure safe passage, and de-escalate tensions in international waters” surrounding the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>43</sup> A complementary mission is the European-led maritime surveillance mission in the Strait of Hormuz, including Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Both Japan and South Korea have deployed independent maritime missions as well.<sup>44</sup> These initiatives offer visions of what a less US-centered security architecture could look like. Israeli security has also been rendered less immediate after it established diplomatic relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020. While it still faces serious threats from Iran and its proxies, the range of state-driven threats from within MENA is as low as it has ever been.<sup>45</sup> Taken together, the changing nature of US interests in MENA requires a foreign policy recalibration as well, a point Karlin and Witts emphasized in arguing that although the “Middle East still matters to the United States, it matters markedly less than it used to,” explaining why recent presidential administrations shared “the view that the United States is too involved in the region.”<sup>46</sup> All of this contributes to a widely-shared belief that the US is looking for a MENA exit strategy.

### **A Gulf order in flux: order transition, not Power Transition**

What would US hegemonic retreat mean for Gulf order? The 2003 invasion of Iraq is a major inflection point, and the consequences of the US’ inability to achieve its goal of building a stable democratic Iraqi state has brought the idea of US hegemony in the Gulf into question. Gause has described this unsuccessful attempt at re-ordering the Gulf subregion as ‘failed hegemony.’<sup>47</sup> Philips has referred to ‘perceived hegemony’:

the US has still been perceived by many Middle Eastern actors to be hegemonic, while Washington has understandably not sought to promote the reality that it is less dominant than before. This misperception has impacted some states’ policies, with allies such as Saudi Arabia repeatedly urging the US to be more active, and growing disillusioned with Washington when it refused.<sup>48</sup>

Regional leaders must consider the US in their strategic calculus, but Washington’s ability to achieve its preferred outcomes in the Gulf, either through force or persuasion, are limited, making the classification of the US as a Gulf hegemon inaccurate. Schmidt’s definition of hegemony rests on two pillars: preponderant power and the exercise of leadership.<sup>49</sup> Ikenberry and Nexon also emphasize the importance of the mobilization of leadership “by a preponderant power to order relations among actors”<sup>50</sup> as a feature of hegemony. Goh’s study of East Asia in the post-Cold War era makes the same point, that US regional hegemony was established and maintained “not merely as a result of its preponderance of power, but mainly because of the complicity of key regional states, which prefer to sustain a

regional order underpinned by US primacy and leadership.”<sup>51</sup> As described above, US power remains preponderant by conventional measures. Yet in constantly signaling its intention for a reduced role, US leadership is questioned.

Cooley and Nexon’s work on hegemony emphasizes an important point for Gulf order, explaining that in hegemonic systems “the dominant power enjoys a near monopoly on the provision of international goods” or what they describe as ‘patronage monopoly,’<sup>52</sup> which includes security commitments. The Gulf monarchies have long relied upon this to balance against their larger aggressive neighbours, but the alignment with the US has never been a comfortable fit. For one thing, it has always been a set of interest-based rather than values-based relationships, anchored by political and military elites rather than popular support or shared values. Another issue is the asymmetrical nature of the relationships, which triggers a constant fear of abandonment within the GCC states. Al Shayji has described US-GCC relations as “a classic case study of the built-in dilemmas of an alliance between a stronger party and a weaker party.”<sup>53</sup> Add to these factors the prevailing narrative of US retreat from MENA, and the gap between the reality of deep military commitments and the belief of an imminent American retreat becomes clearer. This in turn explains MENA policies from GCC states that often diverge from the US and the increasing outreach to other extra-regional powers for a wider array of interests beyond trade and investment. This also features in Cooley and Nexon’s analysis of the decline of US hegemony: “But even if the hegemon and its allies remain committed to supplying public, private and club goods, the greater availability of alternative suppliers – of exit options – affects the calculations of other states.”<sup>54</sup> US allies and partners in the Gulf have been in the process of developing these exit options, although their preference is clearly to maintain a close security relationship with the US.

Consequently, the Gulf is a subregion in flux. The rise of China has resulted in a growing body of work on power transition theory to explain the emerging global order.<sup>55</sup> Focusing on systemic instability that arises when a rising power’s interests challenge those of a declining hegemon, this fits with the widespread perception of a US in relative decline and a rising China, with the ‘Thucydides Trap’ becoming a shorthand for great power competition.<sup>56</sup> In the Gulf, as in many other regions around the world however, this is not an accurate depiction of the distribution of power. China’s military power in the Gulf is not simply lagging behind the US; it is practically non-existent at this point. While this may not be the case for long, it is unrealistic to imagine any scenario in which Chinese forces could challenge those of the US in the Gulf region. A traditional power transition is not happening in the Gulf, at least not yet. However, it is not unreasonable to describe it as a subregion in the early stages of an order transition. Goh describes the conditions of the end of a hegemonic order as taking place when “hegemonic challengers necessarily dispute not only the incumbent’s hierarchical position, but, more importantly, seek to revise the existing structure of differential benefits.”<sup>57</sup> This provides a useful framework for considering Russia’s emergence as a no-strings attached weapons supplier for MENA states, or China’s as a provider of hard and soft infrastructure throughout the region; the ‘patronage monopoly’

that Cooley and Nexon describe has been challenged. Ambitious extra-regional actors have interpreted US hegemonic retreat as an opportunity to make inroads in a region that has considerable strategic value.<sup>58</sup> Regional actors, intensely aware of the value of great power partnerships, are receptive to these overtures. The US remains the most powerful conventional actor in the Gulf regional security complex, but no longer enjoys what Wight called the ‘justification of power’: the legitimacy to set the rules of a hegemonic order.<sup>59</sup> This order in transition will require states with regional interests to reconsider how they engage with the Gulf.

## Asian Responses

What impact would a Gulf order transition have on the interests of Asian states with deep regional interests? The Asian countries featured in this set of chapters have largely benefited from US hegemony in the Gulf, taking advantage of American security commitments to develop substantial economic presences without assuming a corresponding set of their own security commitments. A US hegemonic retreat would likely require a recalibration of their thinking about how to best approach Gulf security issues. They could use existing alignments in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Conversely, they could determine that their interests dictate a lighter engagement without the safety of the US umbrella. Each has important commercial interests in the Gulf and relies heavily upon its energy. Economic interdependence would indicate a motivation for being involved in regional security. At the same time, each state under consideration has a different strategic logic, informed by domestic, regional, or systemic pressures that will determine whether it is worth shifting more military and diplomatic resources into an unstable subregion.

Asian states are certainly important markets and partners for their counterparts in the Gulf. As seen in Table 2.1, Asia’s great powers – China, India, and Japan – are all major import and export partners throughout the Gulf, while middle powers Singapore and South Korea have dense trade ties with some but not all. This is not symmetrical by any means. For example, while China was Saudi Arabia’s top import and export partner in 2020, Saudi Arabia ranked as China’s 24th largest export market and 13th largest source of imports.<sup>60</sup> The nature of the trade, with energy central to continued Asian economic growth, gives Gulf suppliers an outsized importance, however. Beyond trade, contracting, construction, and services make the GCC states especially attractive partners for each of the Asian states in question, making for economic relationships that appear remarkably sustainable for the long-term.

Yet despite these economic interests, security relations remain relatively underdeveloped. To be sure, there are nascent moves in this direction, with several initiatives developing in recent years. India has intensified strategic relations with GCC countries to the detriment of Iran. In 2014 it signed a defense cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, and a comprehensive strategic partnership with the UAE in 2017.<sup>61</sup> During a state visit to Oman in 2018 Prime Minister Modi announced the signing of an agreement that provides the Indian navy with access

*Table 2.1* Ranking of Asian Countries as Import/Export Partners for Persian Gulf Countries, 2020

	China				India				Japan				Singapore				South Korea			
	Imports		Exports		Imports		Exports		Imports		Exports		Imports		Exports		Imports		Exports	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports										
Bahrain	1	2	5	6	4	37	9	10	10	10	15									
Iran	1	1	3	12	30	35	34	61	20	20	59									
Iraq	1	1	3	2	17	21	26	4	5	5	5									
Kuwait	1	3	6	5	5	44	40	24	24	14	29									
Oman	3	1	2	5	20	7	23	9	9	9	3									
Qatar	2	2	5	3	9	1	17	5	16	4										
Saudi	1	1	5	2	6	3	25	7	9	9	4									
Arabia																				
UAE	2	4	3	2	5	3	25	5	14	14	10									

Source: International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics, 2020.

to Oman's port facilities in Duqm.<sup>62</sup> There are several economic reasons for India to deepen ties to the GCC states. Energy security is a factor; India is set to become one of the world's largest hydrocarbon importers; its oil demand is forecast to increase to ten million barrels per day by 2040, up from 4.7 million in 2017.<sup>63</sup> Gulf energy features significantly in its consumption, with oil and gas from the GCC consistently supplying India with over 50% of its imports. There is a substantial Indian expatriate population on the Arabian Peninsula, estimated at nine million.<sup>64</sup> Remittances from non-resident Indians in the Gulf are a major source of income, accounting for 2% of its gross domestic product in 2019.<sup>65</sup> Trade is also an issue; as seen in Table 2.1, India does a significant volume of trade with the GCC.

There is a strategic logic as well. India's largest security concern remains Pakistan, which has long used Sunni Islam solidarity and security cooperation as a means of strengthening its own relations with the Gulf countries. India's difficult history with Islam has contributed to uneasy state-to-state relations with the GCC countries since partition. However, both sides have come to see value in cooperation to address their own regional security challenges. By engaging more deeply with India, the GCC states have made Iran a less attractive partner for New Delhi. Over the past twenty years India's ties with Iran have cooled while those with the GCC have grown considerably. This works in the other direction as well; India's much larger market and investment opportunities have attracted the GCC while minimizing their reliance on Pakistan. Indian orientation in the Gulf is therefore aligned with the GCC and is likely to maintain this trajectory, with or without US commitments.<sup>66</sup>

Both Japan and South Korea have domestic constraints that limit significant security cooperation, but have made inroads nonetheless. In Japan's case, Article 9 of its constitution renounces war and pledges that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." The Japanese military is therefore defensive by design with limited power projection capabilities. However, it is making minor moves in this direction. In 2017, for example, it appointed its first defense attaché to the UAE in a move described as part of an effort to advance security cooperation.<sup>67</sup> As discussed in Heng's chapter,<sup>68</sup> Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force sent a destroyer to the Gulf in early 2020 after a visit to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE from former Prime Minister Abe, who described the mission as necessary because "Thousands of Japanese ships ply those waters every year including vessels carrying nine tenths of our oil. It is Japan's lifeline."<sup>69</sup> (See Table 2.2.) Still, despite this rhetoric Japan's engagement does not represent a substantial contribution to maritime security.

As for South Korea, the domestic variable is the ongoing hostilities between it and North Korea; it is both militarily and politically challenging to commit troops to a far-off region with immediate security threats at the border, a point Jeong's chapter in this volume illustrates.<sup>70</sup> However, deeper economic engagement, especially with the UAE, has resulted in security cooperation. In 2009, South Korea's Korea Electric Power Corporation signed a \$20.4 billion contract with the UAE's Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation to design, build, and operate four APR1400 nuclear power units at the Barakah nuclear power plant, which

*Table 2.2 Persian Gulf Crude Oil as Percentage of Asian Imports, 2019*

China	43%
India	57%
Japan	84%
Singapore	66%
South Korea	63%

Source: US Energy Information Administration, Country Analysis, 2020; compiled by author.

opened in 2020.<sup>71</sup> In 2018 it was revealed that a clause was added to the deal that, according to former Defense Minister Kim Tae-Young, “guarantees the Korean military’s automatic intervention in an emergency in the UAE.”<sup>72</sup> Minister Kim described it as a “low-risk” commitment because “the UAE is a country in which a war had not taken place for a long time.”<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, this detail was not made public until 2018, underscoring the political sensitivity involved in overseas security commitments. Another element of the South Korea–UAE security relationship is the deployment of the Akh Unit, South Korean special forces, that conducts joint training exercises and counterterrorism training in the UAE and has been deployed since 2011.<sup>74</sup>

As Sim discusses in her chapter,<sup>75</sup> Singapore has also made contributions to Gulf security, but it too faces limitations. Singapore’s primary security concerns remain rooted in Southeast Asia, and as a result its leaders cannot overcommit to Gulf partners. Still, it contributed, alongside Gulf states, to the US-led Combined Task Force 151 anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden between 2009 and 2014.<sup>76</sup> Singapore deployed nearly 1000 Singapore Armed Forces personnel to Iraq under the UN stability restoration operation between 2003 and 2008.<sup>77</sup> It also has contributed to the coalition against the Islamic State, providing another opportunity to work with Gulf counterparts and reinforce Singapore’s reputation as a responsible regional actor.

China too has made moves toward a larger security role, albeit in a somewhat more balanced manner consistent with the ‘zero-enemy’ strategy described in Sun’s chapter in this book.<sup>78</sup> For example, it followed joint drills with the Saudi navy in November 2019 with trilateral exercises with Iran and Russia one month later.<sup>79</sup> Chinese and Saudi Arabian special forces first conducted joint training exercises in 2016 shortly after announcing their comprehensive strategic partnership.<sup>80</sup> Arms sales have long featured in the bilateral relationship as well, although on a modest scale when compared with the US. Chinese sales have largely filled a gap when the Gulf monarchies have not been able to purchase from the US, their vendor of choice. A case in point is a Chinese ballistic missile sale to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s that eventually paved the road for Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations. The Saudis approached China because the US, under pressure from Israel, refused an arms sale to Riyadh.<sup>81</sup> An upgrade to the initial set of missiles was sold

to the Saudis in 2014.<sup>82</sup> Qatar has also purchased ballistic missiles from China.<sup>83</sup> Another component of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Saudi Arabia was a deal between the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology and China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to build a factory in Saudi Arabia to assemble and service Chinese Ch-4 drones for sales to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Egypt, and Iraq.<sup>84</sup> This is only the second Chinese UAV factory to be built outside of the PRC. This too is the result of an inability to purchase the preferred US option, in this case Predator UAVs, due to tight US export restrictions on armed drones. Beyond joint training exercises and these relatively modest arms sales, China's security footprint in the Gulf remains quite shallow.

Despite the beginnings of a larger security presence, the logic for each of these countries appears to be consistent with hegemonic stability theory. A liberal argument emphasizes the economic benefits of maintaining the regional status quo and continuing to bandwagon with US preferences in support of its Gulf allies and partners. Challenging the US through soft or hard balancing would result in costly competition that would only harm their own economies and present challenges in other more vital regions.<sup>85</sup> Since the Gulf is not a core interest for any of these countries – in each case their primary security concerns lie elsewhere: in South Asia for India; in East Asia for Japan, South Korea, and China; and Southeast Asia for Singapore – supporting a fragile status quo in the Gulf continues to make sense. A realist argument would posit that a state will accept the status quo so long as the benefits are greater than the costs; once that situation changes, the willingness to accept the dominant state's preferences would pass.<sup>86</sup> Of the Asian states discussed here, only China could be expected to adopt this logic, given its competitive relationship with the US. In the near term, however, the cost-benefit calculation does not favor challenging the status quo. China has actively been working to avoid disrupting a fragile Gulf order that continues to provide benefits.

This has important implications. Since India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea are all US allies or partners, their participation in Gulf security is not perceived as disruptive by the US. China is another matter. Asked in 2019 if China would consider participating in Operation Sentinel, Ni Jian, its ambassador to the UAE, commented that "We are studying the U.S. proposal on Gulf escort arrangements,"<sup>87</sup> but Beijing ultimately declined. It is not surprising that China would reject working with a US-centered maritime force given the competitive nature of their relationship in other regions. Beijing has serious concerns about America's ability and motivation to constrain China's rise to superpower status, and several recent US government documents justify this concern. The 2017 US National Security Strategy described "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order" that is "taking place in the Indo-Pacific region." It directly targeted China, claiming "Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>88</sup> The US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, declassified in January 2021, makes this even more clear; its first national security challenge is "How to maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing

China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity?”<sup>89</sup> This has not changed with the President Joe Biden administration, which released its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document that describes China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”<sup>90</sup> For Chinese leaders, therefore, a foreign policy across the IOR cannot be premised on US willingness to accommodate an increase in Chinese power and influence.

In this case, a theory between bandwagoning and balancing is required to explain China’s approach to the Gulf, and strategic hedging offers the most accurate account. Strategic hedging is an approach common to second-tier powers that want to increase their political, economic, and military capabilities without antagonizing the dominant power.<sup>91</sup> Goh defines it as a “set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”<sup>92</sup> By not overtly challenging the dominant power, the hedger expands its regional capabilities, usually by economic means, and then slowly by developing the military capacity to protect its gains.<sup>93</sup> Looked at in this light, China’s balanced approach, developing strong economic and political ties with every state in the Gulf, is a textbook example of hedging.<sup>94</sup>

The implications of this for Gulf countries and those Asian states with dense regional interests are important. If the US is looking for a reduced Gulf role yet at the same time challenging China in other theaters of the Indo-Pacific, a more assertive Chinese presence in the Gulf is a likely result. Beijing, believing that it cannot rely upon US preponderance to secure Chinese citizens, assets, and commercial relations in the region, will need to rely on its own steam. As described above, China’s power projection in MENA remains limited; the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) support base in Djibouti remains, as of mid-2021, its only overseas military installation. However, the announcement in 2018 of the ‘Industrial Park – Port Interconnectivity, Two Wings and Two Wheels’ initiative hints at more to come.<sup>95</sup> This initiative links Chinese commercial investments in industrial parks and ports spanning from the UAE to the Suez Canal, ultimately linking supply chains and business clusters from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. While the Djibouti base is the only military facility in this initiative, China appears to be laying a foundation to a regional foothold that could, if the need arose, eventually provide the PLAN with port facilities in the northwest IOR.

For the time being this is unlikely. The GCC countries have been diversifying their extra-regional relationships in a manner that is also consistent with hedging,<sup>96</sup> but giving China naval access in the form of bases would be a breaking point in their relationship with the US. While America’s long-term presence in the Gulf is perceived as uncertain, there is no expectation that China or any other country is willing or able to make the same kind of security commitments that the US has provided over the past 30 years. The GCC countries and China will

continue to engage with each other, but both sides are aware that the repercussions of crossing an American red line are not yet worth the cost.

For Asian extra-regional powers, the US–China competition is no less challenging and threatens their interests in the Gulf and beyond. Asian security is under-institutionalized and reliant upon the US hub-and-spoke alliance system.<sup>97</sup> Beneath the tremendous development and prosperity lies what Lee calls ‘the Asian paradox’: it is “a region that has been an unparalleled economic success but that is also home to the world’s most dangerous, diverse, and divisive security, military, and political challenges.”<sup>98</sup> The prospect of a US–China relationship that transitions from competitive to confrontational could have dangerous consequences in flashpoints like the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, or the Taiwan Strait. Singapore’s prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, voiced this concern: “if Washington tries to contain China’s rise or Beijing seeks to build an exclusive sphere of influence in Asia – they will begin a course of confrontation that will last decades and put the long-heralded Asian century in jeopardy.”<sup>99</sup> Gulf countries, newly Asianized, are equally vulnerable.

## Conclusion

States around the world are deeply integrated politically, militarily, and economically with both the US and China. The prospect of becoming caught between the two superpowers is unappealing, and significant diplomatic energy will likely be expended in an attempt to strike a balanced approach. Alignment patterns across the IOR might make this difficult to achieve, however, as the US approach to the Indo-Pacific, centered on security cooperation with the Quad, is seen by Beijing as a China containment strategy.<sup>100</sup> A similar dynamic is at play in the Gulf, as the US has pressured its regional allies and partners to eliminate engagement with China in areas with security risks, especially technological cooperation in 5G networks, artificial intelligence, satellite communications, and cybersecurity.<sup>101</sup> It is increasingly clear that despite local preferences, the Gulf is under threat of becoming a theater of great power competition between the US and China.

Asian countries, with their reliance on Gulf energy and strong economic incentives to maintain strong Gulf relations, will need to skillfully navigate this transitioning regional order.

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### **3 China’s ‘Zero-Enemy Policy’ in the Gulf**

#### Dynamics and Tactics

*Degang Sun*

Since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was raised in 2013, China has gradually become the largest trading partner of the whole Gulf region, and Beijing has boasted increasing commercial, energy, and investment interests in the area. Meanwhile, the Gulf countries are staunch supporters of China in multiple arenas related to human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, and are active participants of the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). However, China’s regional interests face diverse challenges both within the Gulf and at the systemic level. Regionally, Chinese leaders have to navigate the Iran–Saudi competition, the proxy war in Yemen, political and security instability in Iraq, and competition among Sunni states as Turkey and Qatar have squared off against Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain. All of this must be considered within the larger systemic context of an increasingly contentious relationship between China and the US.<sup>1</sup>

Although China has a long history of relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE), Yemen, Iran, and Iraq, its involvement in Gulf security affairs is relatively new compared with that of Western countries, particularly the US and the UK. China’s diplomacy toward this region over the past six decades has evolved from an ideology-driven to a pragmatism-based model, and from a balance of power logic to one based on strategic equilibrium. Over the next five years, the logic of the BRI – while making headway in the economic domain and acquiring a greater political flavor – suggests that a security dynamic could become the basis of a future global security system, with ramifications for the Gulf region.<sup>2</sup>

Since Britain pulled out its forces in 1971, the foreign policies of the Gulf states have been motivated by the logic of balance of power instead of collective security, an approach favored by China. In March 2021 during his visit to the Middle East, Wang Yi proposed a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East, namely advocating mutual respect, upholding equity and justice, achieving non-proliferation, jointly fostering collective security, and accelerating development cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Comprehensive security regimes, a hybrid of both idealist and realist schools of thought of international relations, rarely occur.<sup>4</sup> Based on zero-sum game conceptions, the major Gulf powers have engaged in ongoing hostilities with one another, making a win-win collective

security arrangement difficult to envisage due to the systemic pressures of US preponderance.<sup>5</sup> Given this background, it is not surprising that China's attitude toward Gulf conflict resolution has been based on a trade-off between maximum economic benefits and minimum political risks. China aims to safeguard its growing commercial interests in the Gulf and maintain its great power status in the world, while avoiding sectarian and geopolitical entanglement. Achieving these goals while pursuing a specific collective security initiative in the Gulf would be a difficult juggling act. Beijing has consistently appealed for peace and dialogue in the Gulf, but it nonetheless believes that a Gulf collective security structure, albeit critical to dilute US hegemony and soft-balancing its military presence, would be hard to achieve in the short term.

### **Zero-Enemy Policy: How China Avoids Political Entanglement in the Gulf Conflicts**

Almost all outside powers have a tendency to balance each other in the Gulf by building alliance systems. Relative to the US, Russia, France, and Britain which are risk-accepting, China is risk-averse in the Gulf. As an alternative to balancing, which is typical of how extra-regional powers approach the region, even-handedness seems to be a better choice for China.<sup>6</sup> Even-handedness is a kind of tactic for risk aversion and equilibrium, while balancing is a kind of active security involvement. The former does not choose side while the latter does. During the Cold War period, Chinese policymakers perceived the Gulf as a critical part of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which itself was a part of Zhongjian Didai ('the intermediate zone') between the Capitalist and the Communist camps. In this intermediate zone, represented by the newly independent and non-aligned Asian, African, and Latin American countries, China competed with the US, seen as the imperial hegemon, and later with the USSR, identified as a revisionist and socialist empire from the 1960s onwards. In the Gulf region this competition took the form of support for South Yemen, the revolutionary force in Oman, and Iraq against the monarchies, regarded as puppets of imperialists.<sup>7</sup>

The Middle East gradually became a Cold War theater, and collective security there was unfeasible. China offered material, political, and diplomatic support to states and non-state actors aligned against the US and its allies. Thus, China sided with the Palestinian cause in the Israeli-Arab conflict, giving economic and military assistance, as well as political and diplomatic support to Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Support was also given to some other Arab countries and movements, such as Algeria, South Yemen, Egypt, and Iraq, regarded as progressive forces.<sup>8</sup> Through taking on a significant burden of economic aid, China strove to break the blockade of the Western and Soviet blocs in the 1960s, consistent with Mao's leadership ambitions in the 'intermediate zone' of the Third World. From 1956 to 1976, China provided a total of \$381 million in aid to Middle Eastern states, accounting for 10% of the total foreign aid of \$3.665 billion in the same period.<sup>9</sup>

With the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the resulting implementation of the opening-up policy of the Reform Era, China's diplomacy toward the Gulf pursued de-ideologized and offending-no-one policies. Beijing proposed neither an alliance policy nor the option of collective security. The Communist Party of China (CPC) regarded economic and trade relations with the Gulf as an important element in fighting poverty within China, which contributed to political stability and regime legitimacy, consistent with a performance legitimacy model. After a four-decade long process of economic reconstruction in its approach to the Gulf, China has established a prominent economic presence in the region, covering a wide range of fields ranging from infrastructure to energy and investment projects, articulated in both the BRI 'Vision and Actions' as well as the Arab Policy Paper.<sup>10</sup> With the increasing number of tangible commercial interests, China's perception of its role in Gulf security is clear. China's policies in the Gulf are characterized by prudence and risk aversion. It cultivates ties with both Sunni and Shi'a, republics and monarchies, Iran and the Arab countries, and avoids entanglement in the internal affairs of regional states, accommodating the expectations and preferences of the ruling elites.<sup>11</sup>

Many countries, such as Indonesia, Tunisia, Qatar, and Turkey, have claimed adherence to a 'zero-enemy policy.' China's zero-enemy policy, inspired and influenced by a diplomatic philosophy with roots embedded in Taoism and Confucianism,<sup>12</sup> renders China quite passive to the Gulf collective security initiative. The assumptions of its zero-enemy policy, fitting within a larger foreign policy doctrine beyond its neighborhood, are as follows. First, it underscores the use of diplomatic power instead of military force, which rests on coercion. Second, it places emphasis on strategic patience instead of perfunctory action as a solution to crisis. Third, so as to avert possible risks, it holds a balanced and neutral attitude toward both the incumbent governments and opposition forces as an alternative to biased support for any one party. Fourth, it places emphasis on multilateralism rather than on unilateral actions. It is this approach that China has adopted that has resulted in an ambiguous and perhaps passive attitude with regards to Gulf security initiatives.

In the past decade, the Gulf region has been characterized by collective defense groupings, such as the US-proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance, the Iran-led Shia Resistance Alliance, rather than collective security. In the face of zero-sum geopolitical rivalry in the Gulf, perceived by China, China does not have a clear strategy. The essence of Chinese cooperation with the Gulf countries is to maintain strategic flexibility. Readjustments to its strategic policy in response to opportunities are made on a case-by-case basis according to the decision-makers' view of trade-offs to avoid risks.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Chinese new leadership was elected in 2012, the Gulf is perceived as an important component of the BRI. The GCC countries plus Yemen, Iran, and Iraq play an essential role in strengthening China's energy security, expanding overseas markets, and propelling its soft power in the new era. Beijing has placed emphasis on its 'Four-No foreign policy': that is non-alignment, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, no proxies, and no filling in the power

vacuum left by other countries.<sup>14</sup> This policy has been welcomed by the Gulf countries. To protect its fragile yet increasingly extensive interests, China has favored the Gulf collective security initiative, but remains vague as to what the essence of this Gulf collective security should be. In the absence of its own initiative, Beijing has supported Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf region.<sup>15</sup>

As to the trajectory toward Gulf security, Beijing argues that outside powers should not seek alliance politics, and that Gulf conflicts should be resolved by the local states themselves through peace and negotiation. The cornerstone of China's involvement in Gulf security affairs hinges on its principle of 'keeping good terms with all parties, and seeking multilateralism in Gulf conflict resolution.' Chinese officials believe that such an approach will be conducive to the improvement of China's international discourse making it more persuasive and that thereby China will increase its moral appeal and political influence, and ensure that it can continue to have 'zero enemies' both among Gulf states and external powers, and can maximize its commercial interests.

The 'zero-enemy policy' is passive and risk-averse, making it hard for Beijing to put forward a concrete Gulf collective security initiative. The China-GCC and China-Iran strategic partnerships only aim at creating a favorable environment for bilateral economic and political cooperation, not pursuing authentic conflict resolution. In terms of the implementation of strategic cooperation with the Gulf countries, China makes use of bilateral channels through pivotal regional states but also takes advantage of multilateral arenas. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the G20, the Conference on Interactive and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA), the AIIB, the Silk Road Fund, and also the GCC, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are all relevant multilateral arenas, but they are not for collective security purposes. This development-oriented model is very different from the Western security-oriented model. For China, the 'peace through development' hypothesis, which places emphasis on the 'development deficit' instead of 'democracy deficit' or 'hegemon deficit,' is the key to conflict resolution in the Gulf.

China's 'zero-enemy policy' in the Gulf has the following tactics: avoiding strategic rivalry with the largest external power (the US), participating in conflict resolutions in the UN Security Council, consolidating economic and trade cooperation with all the Gulf countries, and fostering political trust with all parties.

## Avoiding Sino-US Confrontation in the Gulf

In recent years, Sino-US strategic rivalry has transitioned from a trade war to a technology war, with the US ban on Chinese companies, such as ZTE, Huawei, and TikTok. At the same time, Washington is increasingly critical of Beijing's policy toward Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. In July 2020, the Trump administration abruptly demanded that China close its consulate in Houston under the pretext of security reasons and China, in retaliation, ordered

the US to close its consulate in Chengdu.<sup>16</sup> A new cold war, this time between China and the US, seems to be looming.

There are justifiable concerns among academics and policymakers that Beijing and Washington are falling into the ‘Thucydides Trap’<sup>17</sup>, and that their bilateral strategic rivalry will have a spillover effect in the Gulf.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the US has attempted to undermine its allies’ economic cooperation with China, diluting China’s economic buildup in the region. During his visit to Israel, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned his Israeli counterparts that their cooperation with China would jeopardize their strategic relations with the US.<sup>19</sup> Partly due to US pressure, a Chinese firm failed to win the bid for the world’s largest desalination plant in Israel. What’s more, the Chinese company Huawei might be banned from participating in Israel’s 5G infrastructure network, as it already had been in the UK. Significant Chinese investments in the Gulf, particularly in seaports, telecommunications, civil nuclear power plants, outer space and medicine might be impaired, and the prospect of China-Gulf cooperation is uncertain as well.

China and the US have divergent outlooks on Gulf security governance. There are three general assumptions that account for this divergence from a Chinese perspective. First, the US chooses sides in the Gulf conflicts, and divides the region into two zones: one of peace and prosperity and another of conflict and chaos. Washington has attempted to build a coalition with its allies, promoting an ‘Arab NATO’ consisting of the GCC countries, Jordan and Egypt (the zone of peace).<sup>20</sup> In contrast, China places emphasis on the principles of non-alignment and non-interference, seeking congenial partnerships with almost all interested parties, including those in conflict with each other, and including US–Gulf allies as well as Iran, Iraq, and Yemen, the latter group being perceived as part of the ‘Shia crescent’ threatening the US.

Second, China perceives that the US adheres to unilateralism under the Trump administration and democratic alliance under the Biden administration, while China aims for multilateralism, highlighting that the JCPOA and other UN-led mechanisms for regional resolutions should be followed. China highlighted that the US retreat from the JCPOA had caused a potential civil nuclear power race and, worse still, long-term nuclear proliferation in the Gulf. In August 2020, The UN Security Council overwhelmingly voted against a US resolution to indefinitely extend an arms embargo against Iran.<sup>21</sup> China, together with Russia, vetoed the US-proposed draft, and criticized the Trump administration for having unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA. “In the Middle East, we will right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital US interests.”<sup>22</sup>

Third, the US combines economic and trade issues with politics, while China is opposed to the politicization of the economy and business, aiming to separate economic and trade issues from political issues. China is unhappy with the US decision to exert sanctions against Chinese companies that conduct normal business with Iran. China’s Huawei Company was charged by the US with having covered up its relationship with a firm that had “tried to sell prohibited US computer gear to Iran.”<sup>23</sup> In December 2018, Meng Wanzhou, Huawei’s Deputy Chair

of the Board and Chief Financial Officer was arrested in Vancouver for extradition under US pressure. This is a heated dispute between China and the US and Canada related to Chinese companies' business with Iran.

In the past decade, no significant conflict between China and the US has occurred, and they have coexisted quite peacefully in the Gulf. However, since China put forward the BRI in 2013, and particularly since China became the largest trade partner of Iran, the second largest trade partner of the Arab League and the third largest trade partner of Israel and Turkey, China-US frictions have been increasing due to their strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific regions. The US regards the Gulf as a 'battlefield,' while China looks at the Gulf as a market. Washington designates anti-American forces in the Gulf as troublemakers and as targets of 'governance'; China however regards all countries and parties as real or potential political and economic partners.

With the deterioration of Sino-US relations since Donald Trump became president, the peaceful co-existence of the two giants has begun to fall apart. The US sees Chinese technology gains in the Gulf as a security threat rather than as an economic threat. The increasing economic engagement of China toward the Gulf has inevitably caused American anxiety, as the US interprets Chinese economic activity, particularly in high-tech area, as a security threat.<sup>24</sup> China's seaport construction and operation projects in Port Haifa of Israel, Port Doraleh of Djibouti, and Port Khalifa of the UAE, known as the 'string of pearls,' are perceived as a threat to the US military presence in the region in particular. China's construction of 5G infrastructure in Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Egypt is regarded as a threat to the US Monroe Doctrine in the technological domain as well. David Schenker, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, warned that Huawei has signed agreements with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain; its participation in 5G infrastructure in the Gulf would make it difficult for American and Gulf forces to communicate.<sup>25</sup>

Civil nuclear power cooperation is another potential area for the US to push back against Chinese companies. During the 2014 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, President Xi put forward the '1+2+3' framework of cooperation with the Arab countries.<sup>26</sup> Under this framework, civil nuclear power plants were identified as one of the three new frontiers. In recent years, South Korea intensified its civil nuclear cooperation with the UAE,<sup>27</sup> while Russia has close civil nuclear ties with Egypt, Turkey, and Iran. China is keen on cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Iran but the US is wary of China's civil nuclear cooperation both with US friends and foes. Chinese civil nuclear companies have obtained projects in Pakistan and the UK, but not in the Middle East yet.

In terms of cooperation in outer space, China's Beidou Navigation Satellite System has broken the monopoly of the US GPS in the Gulf, and Beijing has laid a foundation for cooperation with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Tunisia, among others, which perturbs Washington.<sup>28</sup> The China-Arab States BDS/GNSS Center, the first overseas center for China's indigenous Beidou Navigation Satellite System was officially inaugurated in Tunisia in 2018, is another point of friction with the US. China's 25-year strategic investment in energy cooperation

with Tehran may minimize the impact of US sanctions and maximum pressure on Iran. As long-simmering US–China tensions come to a boil, a sweeping 25-year bilateral accord being negotiated between Beijing and Tehran is ringing alarms in Washington.<sup>29</sup> However, it's still too early to predict whether China–Iran strategic agreement will be fully implemented, and Sino-Arab summit, to be held in 2022 seems to be a rebalance vis-à-vis Sino-Iranian strategic agreement.

However, China's adherence to a 'zero-enemy policy,' together with its business-driven international cooperation pattern in the Gulf, has successfully avoided a cold war with the US. First, Beijing highlights that China and the US have different political systems, yet there is no ideological rivalry in the Gulf. Indeed, both the US and China seek pragmatic policies and focus on their respective practical interests. It is not on China's foreign policy's agenda to export communism or socialism.<sup>30</sup> The US has maintained a Middle East alliance system in the Gulf, while China implements a low-level partnership diplomacy, which, Beijing stresses, does not target any parties, including the US. Thus, China is not encroaching on the US sphere of influence.

Second, Beijing demonstrated that unlike the US–Soviet Cold War that resulted in two parallel and separate economic blocs, today both China and the US belong to a unified global market, and the Gulf is part of the world system. Sino-US strategic rivalry is mostly in the Asia-Pacific region. The Gulf remains secondary and both sides may be prone to compromise. Thus, under the framework of the BRI, China does not have the capability or willingness to build another economic bloc beyond the US-led international institutions. Chinese officials consistently describe the BRI and the AIIB as supplementary institutions of the current international economic institutions, rather than a substitute for them. As President Xi said, China seeks no proxies, no spheres of influence, and no filling of power vacuums.<sup>31</sup>

Third, different from the relatively symmetric US–Soviet military parity, China keeps a low profile and stresses that Chinese and US influence in the Gulf is asymmetric. As a developing country, China is much weaker both in hard power and in soft power projection. Beijing has sent a strong signal that China's overall influence is less significant than the US in the Gulf, and US geopolitical and military predominance will not be challenged in the foreseeable future. China's arms sales to the Gulf ranked 15th compared with the substantial US arms sales to the Gulf countries in 2012–2016, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. However, there is a fast growth in China's drone sales and joint cooperation which is causing problems in US–UAE relations and sale of F-35s.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, China highlights that the security partners of the US in the Gulf, i.e., the GCC countries, are simultaneously China's political and economic partners. These countries prefer to maintain a balanced set of great power relationships; they are able to rely on the US in security cooperation while maintaining important trade and energy cooperation with China (as well as India, Japan, and South Korea) for energy supply and demand.<sup>33</sup> This diversification strategy means that these partners can maintain congenial ties with both China and the US, keeping a geopolitical and geo-economic equilibrium between the West and the East instead

of hedging their bets between China and the US. For most GCC countries, looking west for security and looking east for economic interests are compatible. Beijing has highlighted that its economic engagement in the Gulf is compatible with US security engagement in the Gulf. The US, however, is dubious about Beijing's long-term intentions, and in particular is concerned about Sino-Iranian strategic cooperation.

## Maintaining Balance in Gulf Conflict Resolution

China adheres to the 'zero-enemy policy' through even-handedness in the Gulf conflict resolutions. As of 2021, neither the conflict in Yemen nor the dispute over Iran's nuclear issue have been resolved. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has actively participated in security affairs in the Gulf region within the framework of the UN and multilateral institutions but does not side with any state.

On January 3, 2020, Qassem Soleimani, Iranian major general and commander of the Quds Force, a wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, arrived at Baghdad International Airport, where he was greeted by the al-Hashd al-Shaabi deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They were both killed, along with five others, when a US drone fired missiles at their convoy, causing a regional crisis.<sup>34</sup> Yang Jiechi, member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Committee on Foreign Affairs, had an emergency telephone call with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during which he articulated Beijing's concerns:

China has always advocated that differences should be resolved through dialogue and consultation and we oppose the use of force in international relations. It is hoped that all parties concerned, especially the US side, should exercise restraint and return to the track of seeking solutions through dialogue as soon as possible, so as to relax the Gulf tension.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the crisis China kept a moderate tone to reinforce its even-handedness. On January 6–7, 2020, Zhai Jun, special envoy of the Chinese government on Middle Eastern issues, attended the Tehran dialogue forum, and expounded China's position of peace brokering on the situation of the Gulf. He emphasized that China prefers a peaceful settlement of disputes and attempted to maintain congenial relations with both the US and Iran.

In August 2020, the UN Security Council voted on a draft resolution submitted by the US to extend the arms embargo on Iran. Only the US and the Dominican Republic voted for it, while China and Russia voted against it; European allies of the US, including Britain, France, and Germany, abstained. The draft resolution failed to pass.<sup>36</sup> The US 'maximum pressure' on Iran not only failed to obtain the support of the developing countries but also failed to get help from its European allies. China bandwagoned with Russia and vetoed the resolution, but avoided harsh criticism over the US.

In the process of conflict resolution in the Gulf region, China claims that it does not favor any country, but would like to play a constructive role. In October 2020, foreign minister Wang Yi attended the UN Security Council ministerial meeting on the situation in the Gulf region and put forward three proposals for solving the security problems in the Gulf region:

first, we should adhere to the rule of law and build a peaceful Gulf; second, the Gulf countries should adhere to good neighborly friendship and build a secure Gulf; third, we should uphold fairness and justice and build a stable Gulf.<sup>37</sup>

The three principles, resembling strategic hedging, are vague and balanced, aiming to avoid offending anyone. China's peace initiative seems more appreciated by Iran, because it is compatible with the Hormuz peace initiative that it had put forward. At the same time, it did not alienate the Arab Gulf countries. To avoid controversy, China refrained from criticizing anyone who is "interfering in others' internal affairs."

At the end of November 2020, Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was killed in a roadside ambush on Friday afternoon about 40 miles outside Tehran. "Losing his leadership, knowledge and institutional memory is undoubtedly a blow to the Islamic Republic," according to Karim Sadjadpour, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.<sup>38</sup> Once again, Iran was almost in a state of war with the US and Israel. The US sent the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier to the Gulf region. In the face of the escalated situation in the Gulf, leaders of China and relevant Gulf countries maintained consultation and communication for conflict de-escalation through frequent telephone conversations. On December 6, Special Envoy Zhai attended the sixteenth Manama dialogue conference, where he appealed to all countries to help regional countries fight COVID-19, defend multilateralism and international equity and justice, and unwaveringly promote the construction of regional security. He further proposed the construction of a multilateral dialogue platform in the Gulf region, and expressed the hope that under the JCPOA, all parties should manage and control the crisis through collective negotiation, so as to form a new consensus on maintaining regional peace and stability.<sup>39</sup> China's collective security initiative in the Gulf region, vague in essence, is characterized by risk aversion, avoiding offending any parties.

Beginning in August 2020, a regional development has created a new dynamic in Middle East politics, as Israel has successively established diplomatic relations with four Arab countries: the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. China cautiously welcomed the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf countries while calling for a just settlement of the Palestinian issue.

In the case of Yemen, China advocated a political solution to the crisis within the framework of the United Nations with Yemenis playing the predominant role.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, China joined Russia and vetoed seven UN Security Council resolution drafts on Syrian issue, but on issues related to the Gulf security, China either voted for them or abstained (see Table 3.1). China

*Table 3.1* China's votes on the Gulf-Related UN Security Council Resolutions in 2020<sup>a</sup>

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Agendas</i>	<i>Countries That Veto/Abstain</i>	<i>Outcomes of the Draft Resolutions</i>
January 13, 2020	S/RES/2505(2020)	The Middle East situation	None	Pass
January 10, 2020	S/RES/2504(2020)	The Middle East situation	China, Russia, the US, and UK abstained	Pass
February 25, 2020	S/RES/2511(2020)	The Middle East situation (Yemen)	China and Russia abstained	Pass
May 29, 2020	S/RES/2522(2020)	The Iraqi situation	None	Pass
June 29, 2020	S/RES/2530(2020)	The Middle East situation	None	Pass
July 7, 2020	S/2020/654	The Middle East situation	China and Russia vetoed	Fail
July 14, 2020	S/RES/2534(2020)	The Middle East situation	None	Pass
August 17, 2020	S/2020/797	Extension of sanctions against Iran	China and Russia vetoed; UK, France, Germany, and other eight countries abstained; and the US and the Dominican Republic approved	Fail
August 28, 2020	S/RES/2539(2020)	The Middle East situation	None	Pass
August 31, 2020	S/2020/852	Anti-terrorism	US vetoed	Fail
September 18, 2020	S/RES/2544(2020)	Extension of the term of office of the special adviser to the ISIS crime evidence investigation team in Iraq	None	Pass
December 18, 2020	S/RES/2555(2020)	The Middle East situation	None	Pass

<sup>a</sup>Members of the UN Security Council: Belgium, China, Dominica, Estonia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Niger, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, South Africa, Tunisia, the UK, the US, and Vietnam.  
Source: United Nations Security Council, "Resolutions Adopted in the UN Security Council," <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/zh/content/resolutions-adopted-security-council-2020>; United Nations Security Council, "Resolutions Vetoed in the UN Security Council," <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/zh/content/veto-usa>.

refrained from criticizing any parties related to Iraqi sectarian situation, Yemen conflict, and Iranian nuclear issue.

## **The Economic Logic of the ‘Zero-Enemy Policy’**

China’s economic diplomacy toward the Gulf countries is embedded in its business-first strategic culture, i.e. making economic development the priority of the government’s tasks. It is driven more by commercial interests than by security interests. In the face of ongoing turmoil in the Gulf, the PRC has taken a pragmatic stance: seeking the maximum economic benefits and minimum political adventures/risks.<sup>40</sup> Affected by COVID-19, global economic slowdown, volatile oil prices, and conflicts in the Gulf region, the economic growth in the Gulf decreased sharply. The GDPs of the Middle East and Central Asian countries decreased significantly in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. Major economies in the world, such as the US, the European Union, Japan, and India, recorded significant decreases in their trade with the Gulf.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, China and the Gulf countries have maintained close economic ties despite these vicissitudes. The year 2020 witnessed a growth of trade volume between China and the UAE and Yemen from January to September 2020, compared with that in 2019 (Table 3.2). That is because China effectively controlled COVID-19 and restarted its economy hence rejuvenating business with the Gulf. Although the Gulf countries accounted for a small proportion of China’s total foreign trade, China was the main trading partner of the Gulf countries and the largest one of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the UAE.

The bilateral trade volume between China and Iran decreased substantially due to COVID-19, the drop of oil price, and geopolitical rivalries. In 2020, the Trump administration imposed the most severe sanctions on Iran, targeting energy exports, finance, and infrastructure, while imposing sanctions on any foreign companies that traded with Iran through long-arm jurisdiction. A large number of companies from China, Russia, Vietnam, Europe, and Turkey were affected, leading to a decline in the trade volume between China and Iran. Despite this, China remains Iran’s largest trading partner.

At the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee held in October 2020, the Chinese government launched a ‘dual circulation’ strategy, under which domestic and international circulations would mutually promote each other, with the domestic circulation as the main element.<sup>42</sup> Different from BRI which gave priority to international cooperation, the dual circulation focused on the development of China’s domestic market. This was a response to attempts to decouple the US economy from China. In the new historical development stage, China and the Gulf countries are closely linked in their medium and long-term development strategies, such as Iran’s five-year ‘economic development plan’; Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain’s Vision 2030 initiatives; Oman’s Vision 2040; New Kuwait 2035; and the UAE’s 2050 Energy Strategy. The Gulf countries are located in the corridor of the East Asian economic circle and the European economic sphere, thus they are the world’s oil and gas hubs and can play a role of bridge and link.

Table 3.2 Trade Volume between China and the Gulf Countries from January to September 2020 (Unit: 10,000 RMB)

Gulf Countries	Trade Volume of September 2020	Trade Volume from January to September 2020	China's Export Volume in September 2020	China's Import Volume in September 2020	China's Import Volume from January to September 2020	Trade Volume Compared with 2019 (±%)
Bahrain	65,196	685,138	58,165	598,063	7,031	-22.4
Iran	953,085	7,839,958	462,069	4,646,720	491,016	-36.8
Iraq	1,569,305	16,158,983	733,297	5,453,272	836,008	-1.0
Kuwait	704,129	7,330,283	207,345	1,768,959	496,785	-15.9
Oman	1,238,951	9,516,930	190,422	1,456,240	1,048,529	-11.2
Qatar	787,932	5,366,778	166,991	1,281,390	620,941	-0.7
Saudi Arabia	4,203,509	34,480,137	1,649,401	14,087,647	2,554,109	-11.5
The UAE	3,153,959	24,867,020	1,910,042	15,936,532	1,243,917	4.4
Yemen	137,203	1,841,210	136,862	1,442,136	341	1.0

Source: General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China: "Total Value of Import and Export Commodities by Countries (Region) in September 2020," accessed January 23, 2021, <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/302274/302277/302276/3336313/index.html>.

Within the BRI blueprint, the Gulf countries are China's natural energy, economic and trade partners, and China wants to demonstrate that it is a friend to all and a foe to none. Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, and Bahrain joined the AIIB, and these countries are important partners in building the BRI partnership. Iraq's Minister of Transport, Abdul Allah al-Leibi, highlighted that Iraq wanted to accelerate the process of joining the AIIB and bandwagon with Chinese economic development.<sup>43</sup> In 2020, enterprises from Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries actively participated in the third China International Import Expo (Shanghai) and the 2020 Canton Fair.

The GCC countries are China's high-tech partners as well. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, Sino-US strategic rivalry has escalated, but Gulf states and China have overcome US objections and carried out high-tech cooperation. With the rapid development of mobile payment and digital economy in the Gulf, high-tech cooperation has become a new frontier. Huawei has won 12 5G commercial contracts in the Gulf and other parts of the Middle East, the second largest market in the world after Europe. For example, Huawei and Etisalat, the largest telecom operator in UAE, jointly deployed the 5G network and established 600 5G sites to cover most areas.<sup>44</sup> In April 2020, Huawei and Oman's Ministry of Technology and Communications signed a memorandum of understanding, according to which the two sides agreed to speed up cooperation in artificial intelligence, electron cloud and '5G' and in other fields. China's financial companies signed cooperation protocols with the Abu Dhabi International Financial Center on the ADGM Digital Lab in 2020, to jointly develop financial and technical services and enhance the UAE's financial competitiveness by building a Digital Belt and Road.<sup>45</sup> The China-UAE Economic and Trade Digital Exhibition was held in July 2020. By relying on the virtual exhibition platform of China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, the online exhibition covers smart cities, medical products, textile fashion, cultural innovation, new agriculture, and food; more than 1000 Chinese and Arab enterprises participated in the exhibition.<sup>46</sup> Economic and trade cooperation between China and the Gulf is expanding from traditional energy and infrastructure investment to the field of new infrastructure, that is, using network technology and digital platform to build smart economy and new energy cities, absorb the achievements of new scientific and technological revolution featuring digitization, intelligence, and networking. Through business activities, China is able to seek common ground while putting aside differences with the Gulf countries.

### **Keeping an Equilibrium in Political Partnerships**

China's Arab Policy Paper highlighted that "We will further improve the mechanism of China-Arab intergovernmental consultation and cooperation, make the best of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, such as the strategic dialogue and political consultation, and enhance exchanges and communication, in order to realize common development."<sup>47</sup> Since 2016, Chinese President Xi has visited the Gulf for twice; in 2021, Yang Jiechi, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs

Commission of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid visits to the Gulf as well. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, Saudi King Salman and the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, and Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Beijing. The UAE appointed Khaldoon al Mubarak as Presidential Envoy to China.

China was taken by surprise when the Saudi-led coalition broke diplomatic relations with Iran (in 2016, and UAE downgraded its relations with Iran) and Qatar (in 2017). China ignored the internal and external discord within the Gulf and focused more on their respective policies toward China. Thus Beijing has maintained close communication with all the Gulf countries, and President Xi in particular has set up congenial relations with all the heads of states.

China's even-handedness is based on the premise that China and the Gulf countries are all developing countries. Historically, the Confucian and the Islamic civilizations learned from and influenced each other, contributing to shared historical memories for contemporary political trust. At the end of November 2019, the third Ministerial Meeting of the Forum on Ancient Civilizations was held in Beijing, attended by representatives from Iran and Iraq, among other countries. In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19, the number of tourists from China and the Gulf countries dropped sharply, and various academic exchanges and business activities were disrupted, but political ties remained intact. Beijing keeps a delicate balance among all the Gulf countries in leaders' phone-call diplomacy to ensure that no party will feel uncomfortable or isolated.

In January 2020, President Xi sent condolences to Oman on the death of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, and dispatched his special envoy Wang Zhigang, Minister of Science and Technology, to Oman to attend the funeral. At the same time, Xi congratulated the new Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, and stressed that China attached great importance to the development of Sino-Omani relations and was willing to work with the new Sultan to push the strategic partnership between the two countries to a new level.<sup>48</sup> On September 30, 2020, President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, respectively, sent condolences to the new Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Sabah of Kuwait when the Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah passed away.

In 2020, China and Saudi Arabia celebrated the 30th anniversary of their diplomatic ties, and President Xi exchanged congratulatory messages with King Salman. The two sides held concerts and a series of activities commemorating "the long history of friendship between China and Saudi Arabia."<sup>49</sup> On July 8, Chen Weiqing, Chinese Ambassador to Saudi Arabia was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the Chinese website of the Saudi Research and Knowledge Exchange Center.<sup>50</sup>

In the Greater Middle East, the UAE was the latest country to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with China in 2018. The UAE is a staunch supporter of China on Xinjiang issue; it is also proactive in welcoming Huawei in 5G infrastructure; Dubai hosts approximately 300,000 Chinese nationals. In July 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the UAE

held the online ‘UAE-China Cultural Week’ broadcasting. The activities included a series of online cultural exchange activities such as cultural forum, art workshop, and music performance.<sup>51</sup> On July 16, China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the UAE Ministry of Economic Affairs jointly hosted the China–UAE Tourist Cooperation Forum through video connection. The Forum was the core of the first China-UAE Economic and Trade Digital Expo in 2020, inviting Chinese and Arab cultural and tourist authorities, enterprises, and service sectors.<sup>52</sup> The establishment of Dubai Chinese School in 2020 was another important achievement of people-to-people exchanges between China and the UAE. On September 1, the School officially opened, which was one of the first batch of Chinese schools set up overseas by the Chinese Ministry of Education.<sup>53</sup> In December 2020, the Ministry of Education of the UAE signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Executive Committee of ‘Embracing China,’ indicating that Chinese language had entered the whole curriculum system from basic education to higher education in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

China keeps an equilibrium between the Arabian Gulf countries and Iran as well. In November 2020, the 11th Annual Meeting of China-Iran Friendship Association was held online. Lin Songtian, President of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Chairman of the Iran-China Friendship Association, and Vice Minister of the Ministry of Cooperation, Labor and Social Welfare of Iran, attended the online event.<sup>54</sup>

President Xi and the Saudi King Salem had phone call in February 2020, and Xi thanked Saudi Arabia for its staunch support for China’s anti-COVID-19 endeavors, demonstrating the sincere friendship and high-level comprehensive strategic partnership between Beijing and Riyadh.<sup>55</sup> Xi also thanked Qatar for providing anti-epidemic materials which was distributed through the Qatar airline networks in the process of China’s fight against COVID-19. On February 25, Xi Jinping and Mohamed bin Zayed, Prince of Abu Dhabi of the UAE, had a phone call on public health cooperation. China appreciated the UAE for offering generous and emergency medical assistance.<sup>56</sup> Since March 2020, COVID-19 began to spread rapidly in the Gulf, where Iran became the new epicenter. President Xi and President Rouhani talked on phone twice on March 14 and April 27. To help Iran fight the epidemic, China donated emergency materials and sent a medical team.<sup>57</sup>

With the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the Gulf states, many countries decided to lockdown, and public health and safety became the top priority of the Gulf governments. In face of the Western criticism on the alleged outbreak of the virus, China launched its vaccine diplomacy and advocated that all countries put aside ideological and geopolitical differences and form a united anti-epidemic front. Saudi Arabia held the virtual G20 summit in 2020. Guided by the vision of building a community of shared future for mankind, Xi argued that it was imperative for all countries to pool their strengths and speed up research and development of drugs, vaccines, and testing capabilities for the world.<sup>58</sup> China advocated joint prevention and control under the framework of multilateralism, strengthening coordination, and providing emergency assistance to developing countries with

underdeveloped medical conditions, which is generally welcomed by the Gulf countries.

Affected by the epidemic, the ninth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was held online in July 2020. Foreign Ministers of Arab countries, including eight Arabian Gulf countries, attended the video conference. The two sides adopted the Amman Declaration and agreed to strengthen the strategic partnership between China and Arab States and promote the implementation of the Action Plan for the Forum from 2020 to 2022.

Public health cooperation has become an increment of political cooperation between China and the Gulf countries, which has promoted mutual support in areas involving China's core interests. China welcomed Qatar and the UAE's medical assistance to Iran, applauding that it was a constructive measure. China benefited from its "zero-enemy policy" in the Gulf through issue-linkage. On Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, the South China Sea, human rights, and other issues, the Gulf countries firmly supported China as well. For instance, after the National Security Law of Hong Kong was passed by the National People's Congress at the end of June 2020, more than 70 countries issued statements expressing their support. Developing countries including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries echoed support for China's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

The Gulf has so many problems that it cannot afford another vicious cycle of great power rivalry. China's 'zero-enemy policy' does not aim to worsen Saudi-Iran or US-Iran tensions. In fact, as China basically pursues geo-economic interests of trade, investment, and energy, the US sustains its geopolitical interests of safeguarding regional leadership, launching anti-terror campaigns, and defending allies in the Gulf. Notwithstanding this, the two sides share compatible and complementary interests in Gulf security governance and conflict de-escalation, which forges structural dynamics for Beijing and Washington to seek common ground while shelving differences in the vicissitude of this troubled region.

First, China and the US are complementary partners and they do share an important interest, namely maintaining peace and security in the region. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, both want to see the peaceful settlement of conflict in Yemen. ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates have posed potential threats to both US military predominance and Chinese investments and expatriates. Beijing and Washington may restart the bilateral consultation mechanism on Gulf affairs which was established in 2012 under the administration of President Barack Obama. Countries in the Gulf, including those in the GCC, do not necessarily need to take sides between China and the US if the two economic and military giants can manage their disputes.

Second, allies of the US have established interdependent energy and economic relations with China, making it impossible for them to implement a strategic

decoupling from China. With volatile oil prices, a sluggish economy, and the prolonged COVID-19 crisis, countries in the Gulf rely on Asian powers that have a high demand for Gulf oil. Since the US and China share the same partners, third-party economic cooperation among the US, China, and the Gulf, particularly in investments on mega-projects have the potential to be promising.

Third, Sino-US cooperation in high-tech is crucial as well. China and the US boast advanced and complementary technologies in outer space, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and telecommunication. Washington and Beijing provide training programs to develop Gulf human resources. Shenzhen BGI, a Chinese genetics firm, has contracts with the UAE and Saudi Arabia for joint cooperation in combating COVID-19, but the US government declared BGI to be a bio-security threat to its allies.<sup>60</sup> Both the US and China are testing vaccines for COVID-19. Joint scientific and medical research among China, the US, and Gulf partners would provide an opportunity for collaboration, crucial not only to Sino-US strategic trust, but also a great contribution to humanity.

In a word, China's 'zero-enemy policy' in the Gulf – seeking economic cooperation while avoiding involvement in regional security conflicts – has generally been successful, but it's quite hard to "tread on the ice and dance with all parties." Beijing may find it increasingly challenging to maintain this approach. In particular, the 25-year Sino-Iranian strategic agreement has sent a signal to the Arabs and Israelis that it is prioritizing Iran. Such an even-handedness principle may meet more and more hurdles in reality and may be hard to sustain in the long run, unless the Gulf security disputes are settled.

## Notes

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## 4 Japan's Role in Gulf Security

*Yee-Kuang Heng*

Japan's ties with the Gulf have historically been defined by energy needs, although the relationship has broadened considerably in recent years. Member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, are major sources of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG). For instance, the CEO of Qatargas personally traveled to Japan roughly a month after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 to deliver assurances on additional supply if needed. In 1991, Japan became the 'foundation customer' for Qatari gas, with Chubu Electric as the first company to sign an agreement with Qatargas. In 1997, Qatar's first shipment of LNG was to Japan.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Qatar was the third largest LNG source for Japan after Australia and Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, Japan was the largest export destination for Qatar's LNG.<sup>3</sup> Qatar is expected to benefit from Japan's pledge of net zero emissions by 2050, which might imply a switch away from coal to LNG. As Japan's Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu put it rather frankly and directly,

In the field of energy security, we depend on the Middle East to secure ninety percent of our crude oil needs, and that is why we consider peace and stability of the GCC countries vital and extremely important for us.<sup>4</sup>

The GCC countries, taken as a whole, have consistently provided 70–75% of Japan's petroleum (crude and product) needs. For two consecutive months in May and June 2019, the UAE even became the top crude oil supplier to Japan, as Japan reduced imports from Iran under pressure from the Trump administration.

The Japanese government has long practiced a 'dual win' approach whereby deals struck for oil and energy supplies are often accompanied by Japanese industries providing infrastructure exports such as power plants or water recycling technology.<sup>5</sup> Access to stable oil and energy from the Gulf meanwhile remains Japan's overriding goal, coupled with new fuel ammonia supply chains to support Japan's drive toward carbon-neutrality. There is also an increasing need for new growth markets as Japan's population declines inexorably. As such, non-oil trade has been increasing due to an alignment between Japan's desire to revive its own economy and economic diversification programs in the Gulf.<sup>6</sup> Japan's Ministry for Economy, Trade and Industry has promoted the 'Green Aid Plan' to developing countries to support environmental protection

and energy conservation technologies that could help stimulate Japan's own economic growth.<sup>7</sup> Japan has actively embraced the region's drive for sustainability and economic diversification by sharing solar and renewable energy technologies in exchange for stable oil and gas supplies.<sup>8</sup> Such commercial diplomacy toward the Gulf, however, cannot be divorced from the critical security issues of the region.

Japan's role in Gulf security is not historically unprecedented. What is often overlooked is that during the 1980s Iran–Iraq War, Japan's shuttle diplomacy had nearly led to a ceasefire by some accounts, while Western nations remained more hostile to Iran.<sup>9</sup> Japan's perception of the Gulf's strategic relevance has in fact gone through several stages, accompanied each time by a certain sense of trauma and an agonizing exposé of Japan's lack of strategic influence to shape outcomes. From the first oil shock to the two Gulf Wars, to Iran's nuclear challenge and the Qatar crisis, this inability stems from several factors, including Japan's own constitutional limitations on deploying its military forces and wariness of being involved in the region's complex politics.

Several theoretical frameworks have been suggested to try to explain Japan's behavior in the Gulf. Not surprisingly, given the depth of its commercial links with the region, Japan's foreign policy toward the Gulf has been described as "liberal diplomatic"<sup>10</sup> and "non-controversial"<sup>11</sup> with a strong emphasis on economic cooperation and development aid. While the broad umbrella of Japanese foreign policy has been described as "maritime realism,"<sup>12</sup> Japan is also seen to have prioritized pragmatism and mercantile values in its Middle East foreign policy particularly during the US-led war on terror, maintaining ties with Iran despite the Bush administration labeling it part of the "axis of evil."<sup>13</sup> Japan's activities in the Gulf are not often evaluated in terms of balance of power theories, although some have suggested the idea of Japan–India maritime cooperation meant Japan was taking a step toward supporting a balance of power structure in the Indian Ocean.<sup>14</sup> However, Japan has been said to be bandwagoning with the US, most notably with its deployment of military forces to support the stabilization mission in Iraq after 2003. This period of apparent bandwagoning does appear an exception to Japan's historical attempts to hedge. Most of the extant literature on Japanese 'hedging' strategy has been in relation to China, with a focus on East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific vision. Japan's policies in the Gulf have barely figured within the broader discussions on Japan's hedging. However, this chapter suggests that certain features of hedging may explain to some extent Japan's attempts to carve out a more nuanced positioning vis-à-vis the US and Iran, and even earlier during the 1970s oil crisis and the 1980s Iran–Iraq War. As one leading proponent of hedging has suggested,

Hedging is not about strict non-alignment, because it typically involves *multi-pronged* alignments, i.e. simultaneously cultivating, maintaining, and enhancing partnerships with as many powers and players for as long as feasible. Hedging thus implies a certain amount of strategic activism and diversification.<sup>15</sup>

Insistence on not taking sides is another indicator of hedging, for it reflects Japan's consistent attempts over the years to adopt a more nuanced middle ground distinct from the Western powers, including its key US ally.

Problemsatically for Japan, some Gulf leaders *perceive* it to ‘bandwagon’ with its US ally, despite Tokyo’s attempts to present itself as a more independent ‘proactive’ contributor to peace and security under the second Abe Shinzo administration from 2013 onwards. This perception has hamstrung a potential role in shaping the regional security architecture, especially with Abe’s attempts to develop a strong personal rapport with Donald Trump during the Trump administration. Continuing dependence on the US alliance to address security threats closer to home from China and North Korea has also meant that supporting US positions in the Gulf are also interpreted through the lens of alliance burden-sharing for Japan. While an increasing sense of wariness emerges alongside the rise of Chinese influence in the Gulf, this has not yet translated into full-blown balance of power policies. In addition, Japan’s on-off cooperation with India in developing third country Gulf ports and growing convergence of interests in critical sea lines of communications and maritime have yet to translate into coordinated attempts to shape the Gulf security complex.

### **Japan’s Foreign Policy in the Gulf: Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

Japan’s stunning post-war economic rebirth was fueled by copious amounts of Gulf oil and energy supplies. Strong relations with the Gulf were thus deemed imperative in order to secure access to oil.<sup>16</sup> During the 1973 oil crisis, Japan faced an oil embargo by Arab countries for its initial hesitation to directly criticize Israel during the Yom Kippur War. The sudden spike in oil prices highlighted Japan’s vulnerability as well as its need to maintain good relations with Arab states.<sup>17</sup> The ripple effects of the ‘oil shock’ hit Japanese households directly and hard, notoriously with the panic buying of toilet paper. Japan’s state broadcaster, NHK, in a 2020 retrospective, referred to the “71 days of turmoil on the Japanese archipelago” [列島が翻弄された71日] and a “historical turning point” [運命の分岐点]. In response to the oil shock, Japan launched into a desperate spate of frantic diplomacy. A flurry of senior Cabinet ministers rushed to the region where none had previously visited, offering credits and development aid to Arab countries to develop their infrastructure. Deputy Prime Minister Takeo Miki, as special envoy, spearheaded these attempts. Eventually, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nikaido issued a statement directly criticizing Israel by name, whereupon Japan was finally and belatedly recognized as a “friendly nation” by Arab nations. This traumatic experience was the first of several jolts to Japan’s need for stability in the Gulf. It was also an early precursor of Japan being caught in the crosshairs of its US ally’s pro-Israel stance and demands of Arab oil-producing countries to criticize Israel. Since then, Japan has been strongly concerned with, above all else, stability in the region to ensure its energy supplies.<sup>18</sup> Such panicked responses to the first oil crisis suggested that “Japan’s concern at that time was

only to secure an oil supply by any means.”<sup>19</sup> The 1973 oil crisis brought home to Japan that if Gulf states and the West disagree, then Japan should try to be pro-Gulf, or at least neutral or else face an oil embargo. Japan has tried to maintain *multi-pronged* alignments and partnerships with as many powers and players for as long as feasible.

The 1991 Gulf War highlighted once again Japan’s inability to shape regional security. The constitutional and political constraints on deploying its Self-Defence Forces to the Coalition war effort led to derisive criticisms of ‘check-book diplomacy’.<sup>20</sup> For a country that depended heavily on energy being smoothly transported through the Gulf’s critical sea lanes, Japan was caught flat-footed. Belated deployments of minesweepers after the war had ended did little to stem perceptions of Japan being a political dwarf but an economic giant.<sup>21</sup> This episode again underscored Japan’s strategic shortcomings when dealing with turbulence in the Gulf security complex. The resulting “Gulf War trauma”<sup>22</sup> shaped Japan’s decision to bandwagon with the US-led stabilization mission after the 2003 Iraq war. Determined to demonstrate commitment to its US alliance and to shake off the residual trauma of 1991, Japan resolved to deploy a substantial Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) unit to the stabilization mission after the 2003 Iraq invasion. While the US has historically been pro-Israel, Japan tried to display a more pro-Palestinian attitude to placate the Gulf states and ensure its oil and energy supplies. However, Miyagi points out that the Gulf states themselves have become increasingly disunited (unable or unwilling to use the ‘oil weapon’ to help the Palestinians) and reliant on the US security umbrella against Iran.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Japanese policy toward the region also began aligning with the US. Thus, Miyagi contends that Japan has been bandwagoning with the US, especially with the deployment to support US-led stabilization missions in Iraq post-Saddam Hussein. Even this period of apparent bandwagoning, however, did not mean that Japan was completely in tune with the US policy on Iran. Indeed, Japan simultaneously sought stakes in developing Iran’s Azadegan oilfield in 2004. Responding to criticisms that Japan is free-riding on American-backed global security, the Japanese government has been aiming to become more proactive in its security commitments, especially in multilateral efforts.<sup>24</sup> The potential for a US–Saudi Arabia–Japan trilateral maritime security partnership has been attractive to US policymakers.<sup>25</sup>

Since 2010, Japan has been working to diversify and deepen its relationship with the Gulf states beyond oil and LNG.<sup>26</sup> Technology transfer, renewable energy development and tourism are increasing as Japan utilizes these strengths and advantages to make itself a more indispensable and critical partner for Gulf states’ efforts to wean their economies off dependency on oil.<sup>27</sup> Security cooperation is being discussed with Saudi Arabia and UAE (who have exchanged military attachés with Japan)<sup>28</sup> and Japan has forged strategic partnership agreements with them as well. In its first-ever landmark National Security Strategy issued in 2013, Japan outlined its “proactive contribution to peace” policy. Emphasizing its desire to cooperate with like-minded partners, the document explicitly singled out “the sea lanes extending from the Persian Gulf through the South China Sea to Japan.” Kono Taro became

the first Japanese Foreign Minister to attend the Manama Dialogue in November 2017. When he returned again in 2019 as Defense Minister, Kono's speech alluded to Japan's own desires to play a more active regional role: "The challenges to maritime security in the Middle East have provided an opportunity for economically developed Japan to meet its responsibilities within the international community."<sup>29</sup> He touted Japan's efforts at maintaining maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region. These included Operation *Gulf Dawn*, the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) minesweeping mission after the 1991 Gulf War and first overseas deployment since 1945. MSDF commanders and liaison officers are also present in Combined Task Force 151 Headquarters in Bahrain, the multinational anti-piracy taskforce established in 2009 under a United Nations mandate.<sup>30</sup> Kono also highlighted the MSDF's own counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and maritime exercises with partners in the regional waters such as India.

Japan's security perceptions of the Gulf also stem from threats closer to home, especially Iran's relationship with North Korea. During a 2016 visit to Iran, Abe requested that Iran cut military ties with North Korea.<sup>31</sup> By some estimation, 45% of North Korea's trade from 1995 to 2004 was with Iran.<sup>32</sup> One expert claims that parts of North Korea's Hwasong-14 missile are similar to Iranian space launch designs, implying that Iran has supplied missile technology to North Korea.<sup>33</sup> Japan's security challenges within its own region from North Korea and China have thus shaped to some extent its perceptions of the Gulf security complex. Japan's deployment of troops to the stabilization mission in Iraq to support its US ally was interpreted by Japanese scholars as "related to the idea that if Japan fails to maintain its alliance with the United States in the best condition, it may possibly invite North Korean attack."<sup>34</sup> Japan's military mission to Iraq was thus meant to demonstrate a commitment to greater burden-sharing within the US alliance in the face of North Korean provocations.

Historically, Japan maintained a friendly relationship with Iran even after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, continuing to buy oil from Iran despite heightened US–Iran tensions. As hedging theory would suggest, this was an early instance of Japan opting for a path different from its US ally's and attempting to present itself as a more independent actor. Although Japan adopted a more pro-US stance akin to bandwagoning (from 'checkbook diplomacy' during the Gulf War to SDF deployment in Iraq in 2004),<sup>35</sup> it nonetheless continues to make efforts to signal to Iran that it is not fully aligned with the US.<sup>36</sup> Although not a party to the agreement, Japan has continued to support the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite US withdrawal. It doesn't seem that the Japanese government voiced any opinion at least in public on the US attempt to extend the arms embargo on Iran. Japanese media has only reported on the vote itself, and neither the Foreign Ministry nor Cabinet Office has published anything on the matter on their websites. Since Japan was not on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it did not have a representative at the vote, or make any announcements afterwards.

Tracking Japan's evolving perceptions of Gulf security, it is useful to examine the only two strategic partnership agreements Japan has signed with GCC

countries, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia and the UAE host the largest numbers of Japan-affiliated companies in the Gulf. The two countries are also the largest markets in the Middle East for Japanese machinery and automobile exports. Despite some announcements about deepening security cooperation, however, concrete actions fell short.<sup>37</sup> In 2017, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative (CSPI) with UAE was announced in a joint statement. The two countries promised to hold regular security meetings and cooperate on defense technology transfer. A training squadron from Japan's MSDF has periodically docked in the UAE. Japan has also appointed a defense attaché to its embassy in the UAE.<sup>38</sup> Since Japan lifted its weapons exports ban in 2014, the UAE has expressed interest in buying the Kawasaki C-2 transport aircraft; however, the deal has been stalled due to opposition in Japan.<sup>39</sup> Protesters gathered outside Kawasaki's Kobe headquarters against the sale of the aircraft to the UAE on the grounds that it will be used in the Yemen conflict.<sup>40</sup> These protesters asserted that the UAE is the aggressor, so selling the C-2 would make Japan a complicit "merchant of death."<sup>41</sup> However, in November 2020, Sankei News reported that Kawasaki conducted landing tests on unpaved land at the request of the UAE.<sup>42</sup> No further developments have been reported at the time of writing, but it appears the UAE is still considering the C-2 as an option.

During his fourth visit to the UAE in 2020, then-PM Abe continued to emphasize that security was high on his agenda, especially with the deployment of Japanese naval destroyers to the region for information collection missions. He noted that "the UAE plays a key and pivotal role in pursuing sustainable development, peace and stability in the Middle East."<sup>43</sup> In June 2020, then-Defense Minister Kono had a phone call with his UAE counterpart which mostly consisted of "exchanging views."<sup>44</sup> The UAE for the first time joined with India and France in the trilateral *Varuna* naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal in April 2021. Japan in turn participated in the Quad-plus France *La Perouse* exercises also conducted in the same area. The Bay of Bengal linking the Gulf waterways with the Indian and Pacific Oceans is an emerging arena for Japan to engage closer with Gulf partners on maritime security and defense issues.

As for Japan's other strategic partner, King Salman of Saudi Arabia visited Japan in 2017 and unveiled the Japan-Saudi Vision 2030.<sup>45</sup> This included promises of regular communication and cooperation on defense issues. The Japan-Saudi relationship has broadly been described as "Technology for oil."<sup>46</sup> Considering that Saudi Arabia has been working to transition to a post-oil, renewable energy economy, Japan sees an opportunity to strengthen relations by becoming a partner in Saudi Vision 2030. Japan's hydrogen and other renewable technologies are one of its trump cards. Earlier in 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) asked then-Defense Minister Inada if Japan could help promote Saudi Arabia's budding domestic arms industry.<sup>47</sup> Inada replied rather noncommittally, and momentum appears to have dissipated since. Then-PM Abe later visited Saudi Arabia in early 2020 and explained the MSDF's information collection mission to the Gulf. Crown Prince MBS expressed "full support" of the effort, though no new actions were taken on the Saudi part.<sup>48</sup> Overall, the Japanese government

has adopted a rather cautious stance toward more overt military cooperation with either the UAE or Saudi Arabia, since both Arab monarchies are in proxy conflict with Iran, notably in Yemen. This again is indicative of hedging behavior and not taking sides too obviously. Even though Japan stopped importing oil from Iran after coming under pressure from the Trump administration, it still sought to maintain good relations with Tehran in order to maintain the uninterrupted flow of oil and LNG through the Strait of Hormuz. Once again, such patterns of behavior reflect quite closely the assumptions embedded within hedging theory. In April 2021, Japan signed its first-ever bilateral hydrogen cooperation agreement with the UAE, seeking to develop a new hydrogen supply chain from the UAE to Japan, in line with Abu Dhabi's desire to be a hydrogen leader. Deals have also been signed for the UAE to supply hydrogen in the form of ammonia to Japan, as part of both countries' carbon neutral plans. Oil supplies will soon be supplemented by shipments of fuel ammonia and hydrogen between both countries, adding another important dimension to the relationship.

## **Japan and the GCC Dispute**

Qatar had been a major donor toward the 3/11 Great East Japan Earthquake relief efforts, and also served as an intermediary for the Goto Kenji hostage crisis in 2015, when the freelance Japanese journalist was taken hostage by the Islamic State. Qatar also helped facilitate the safe release of another journalist, Yasuda Jumpei, in 2018.

Japan, however, appears to have played a limited role in the GCC dispute. Indeed, the GCC internal dispute seems to have had no practical effect on Japanese foreign policy in the region.<sup>49</sup> In economic terms and on paper, Japan may have had vital interests affected by the dispute. Qatar is the third largest supplier of LNG and oil to Japan, while Japan was also the number one trade partner of Qatar with a trade volume of about \$14 billion in 2019. At the start of the crisis, Abe called both Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Emir of Qatar to voice Japan's support for Kuwait's reconciliation effort.<sup>50</sup> This again indicated Japan's desire to be seen as not taking sides, consistent with its hedging position in the Gulf over the decades.

The main reason Japan wasn't heavily involved in the crisis was because Qatar kept exporting LNG as usual (revenues it especially needed in order to stay solvent and overcome economic effects of the blockade);<sup>51</sup> With no interruption to LNG flows, there was little incentive for Japan to be involved.<sup>52</sup> Some other economic sectors in Japan did suffer, however. Shipping to Qatar became more inconvenient for Japanese shipping companies accustomed to offloading in both Dubai and Doha.<sup>53</sup> The blockade meant that cargo destined for Qatar had to be transferred and placed on a separate ship, which increased shipping costs. For instance, major Japanese gas trader Iwatani suffered disruptions to its shipments of helium produced in Qatar which were previously exported via Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Qatar is Japan's second largest helium source and Iwatani controlled half of the helium market in Japan.<sup>54</sup> Since it was usually exported via Saudi Arabia and the

UAE, the alternative sea route increased helium prices which is also a key component in the manufacture of semiconductors.

Although officials expressed Japan's "readiness to help and support" Kuwaiti and American mediation efforts, there is little indication that any substantial concrete or active actions were taken by Japan.<sup>55</sup> For example, in September 2017, when the press asked MOFA's Deputy Press Secretary Ando about whether Japan was ready to help Qatar overcome the difficulties of the blockade and regain food security, he replied that then-Foreign Minister Kono did not address the particular issue during his visit to Doha although the crisis was discussed.<sup>56</sup> Sources on Japan–Saudi relations<sup>57</sup> and Japan–UAE relations<sup>58</sup> do not suggest any decline in bilateral relations as a result of the Qatar crisis (or for any reason around 2017). There is little evidence, at least in public records, that Japanese officials brought up the Qatar issue publicly during visits to Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

### **Japan Caught between the US and Iran**

Iran is another regional security issue that underlines the difficulties Japan faces in trying to shape the regional environment with its hedging position. Iran was one of Japan's top two suppliers of oil, even throughout turbulent times such as the 1953 nationalization of the Iranian oil industry and the 1979 Revolution. Iran remained among Japan's top suppliers for more than three decades even after the revolution and was the first supplier of oil to Japan from a non-International Oil Company. Notably, Japan's continued relationship with Iran was in defiance of policies adopted by other Western powers such as the US and UK. In 2017, Japan–Iran trade was worth around \$4.05 billion. Of this amount, Japan imported \$3.23 billion worth of goods from Iran, of which 98% was crude oil. Japan exported to Iran \$851 million worth of goods, mainly vehicles, machinery, metals, chemicals, and non-metallic minerals.<sup>59</sup> Iran is not a significant economic partner for Japan, apart from oil supplies and automobile exports. Both countries share unfortunate experience of devastation caused by weapons of mass destruction (nuclear bombs in the case of Japan, and chemical weapons for Iran during the Iran–Iraq War), a point raised by President Rouhani in 2013 to visiting Japanese special envoy Komura Masahiko.

Since the end of the Cold War, Japan's Gulf policies have largely been US-anchored. However, in the case of US–Iran tensions, it appears Japan prefers to keep some distance from what might appear to be the US' more aggressive attitude and to present itself to Iran as a non-Western and non-coercive business partner. Besides energy and trade projects, Japan was the only Western-bloc country to maintain relations with Iran after the revolution. Despite increasing pressure from rounds of US sanctions on Iran and to reduce oil purchases, Japan's attempt to maintain multi-pronged partnerships for as long as feasible is suggestive of hedging. Foreign Minister Motegi has alluded to the potential diplomatic advantages Japan might have in the Gulf:

Japan is an ally of the United States, and has also built good relations with various countries in the Middle East. We will continue to leverage this to urge

the countries concerned at various levels to work toward easing tensions and stabilizing the situation in the Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

His predecessor Kono further claimed that “We can play an honest broker in the Middle East, as we have no colonial history or negative footprint in the region.”<sup>61</sup> Then-PM Abe likewise stated that “because the situation is tough, there is something only Japan can do here, given its alliance relationship with the United States and the long-standing amicable ties with Iran.” Abe refused to attribute responsibility to any specific country for the mysterious attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, in contrast to the US, Britain, and others that explicitly singled out Iran.

Abe’s visit to Iran in 2019 was the first by a Japanese prime minister in 41 years. Some observers suggest this was an electioneering ploy just before the Upper House election in July 2019. In a BBC interview, Jeff Kingston of Temple University suggested that the PM knew that any effort was futile but would boost his image domestically.<sup>62</sup> Abe hoped to show that he was “trying to do something” befitting an international leader of a major country. Former Japanese ambassador to Yemen, Masaaki Noguchi, posited that Abe was using the opportunity as a way to get the message of restraint across to both sides.<sup>63</sup> By visiting Iran and meeting Ayatollah Khomeini (uncommon among Western leaders), as well as maintaining a close relationship with President Trump, Abe was in a unique position to speak with both sides. During such instances, Noguchi felt that the PM could convey each side’s position to the other, as well as push the message of de-escalation. Therefore, while he didn’t actually mediate a resolution, Abe was able to demonstrate each side’s willingness to show restraint and prevent the outbreak of war. Although Noguchi paints a rather optimistic picture of Abe’s visit to Iran, it does offer some degree of insight into the PM’s motivations. Finally, journalist Makino cites anonymous government sources to explain that the entire effort was the initiative of the Prime Minister’s Office rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA).<sup>64</sup> Professional diplomats were skeptical that such an effort would be effective or worth trying. Therefore, by implication it was the PM or those close to him who envisioned a possible mediation (or at least the offer for mediation). This possible personal desire of the PM may well reflect his long-standing desire to demonstrate to the world that “Japan is back” and Japan will always remain a first-rate power. Unsurprisingly, domestic conservative media such as Sankei News reported with approval that Trump allegedly viewed Abe as “the only person” who can pull off the mediation.<sup>65</sup>

Notwithstanding whatever leverage Abe thought he might possess, he faced a “Hormuz dilemma” on whether to support a US-lead maritime coalition.<sup>66</sup> This dilemma itself is partly a consequence of Japan’s long-standing desire to adopt a hedging position vis-à-vis the US and Iran. Having stated categorically his administration’s desire to be a “proactive contributor to peace” and safeguard maritime shipping lines of navigation, doing nothing in the midst of this crisis might have severely undermined Japan’s credibility on this matter.<sup>67</sup> Japan’s US ally has also placed pressure on the country to do more, exemplified by then-President Trump’s tweet complaining that Japan should be “protecting their own ships” and

the US was guaranteeing shipping lanes for “zero compensation.” In retrospect during the Cold War, the US had “tacitly acquiesced to Japan’s diplomatic posture toward Iran” but Japan found itself under increasing pressure especially during the Trump administration.<sup>68</sup> Japan is not a signatory to the Iran nuclear agreement, the JCPOA, but the Trump administration’s abandonment and re-imposition of sanctions risked damaging Japan’s relationship with Iran. Even through rounds of sanctions from the US and the EU, Iran continued to be a relatively minor oil supplier to Japan.<sup>69</sup> This changed in 2019 however as the US’ departure from the JCPOA prompted renewed sanctions (Japan’s exemption from secondary sanctions expired during this period).<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE combined consistently to contribute more than half (65% in 2019) of Japanese oil imports since 1960.<sup>71</sup>

Abe traveled to Tehran ostensibly as a ‘neutral’ independent actor to help lower tensions between the US and Iran. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) official insisted that other players also had an interest in the issue and “we want to be able to carry the voice of the international community to Iran, not just the U.S.” This implies that Abe’s mission had in mind a desire for Japan to act in some ways as a standard-bearer for the international community, raising its security profile in the process. However, the Iranian government came to the conclusion that Abe was working on Trump’s behalf and this was seen to have severely damaged “Abe’s foreign policy credibility and jeopardized Tokyo’s traditionally closer ties with Teheran.”<sup>72</sup> In a visit which “highlighted the limits of Japan’s independence as an international actor,” Abe was humiliated during his meeting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who spoke in front of TV cameras with Abe by his side that the Japanese leader was wasting his time bringing a message from Trump.<sup>73</sup> To rub more salt to the wound, an oil tanker operated by a Japanese company was mysteriously attacked in the Gulf of Hormuz, coinciding with Abe’s visit. Since the Japanese MOFA purportedly knew mediation was futile anyway, it is difficult to assess whether the effort had an impact on previous Japanese perceptions of the regional security context. Nevertheless, this slap in the face reiterated once again Japan’s limited capabilities to influence either Iran or the US, and more broadly the inability to translate its hedging position into strategic influence. Trump very quickly dismissed Abe’s attempt at diplomacy. Furthermore, the manner of the subsequent MSDF “information collection” deployment (not joining the US coalition, avoiding the Hormuz Strait and Persian Gulf) indicates Japan’s continuing hedging approach of the past.

In Japan, conflict between the GCC and Iran is largely framed as a US–Iran issue, with limited focus on Gulf monarchies themselves. Considering the escalation in the Strait of Hormuz (which included a suspected Iranian attack on a Japanese oil tanker and Saudi oil facilities), Japan deployed the MSDF to “collect information” shortly after PM Abe’s visit to the UAE and obtained support from the UAE government.<sup>74</sup> As noted by Iranian media, the Japanese government announced that it would cooperate with but not join the US-led coalition Operation Sentinel.<sup>75</sup> This implied that although Japan clearly has strong ties with the US and the Gulf monarchies, it wished to remain amiable with Iran. Japan’s

Minister of Defense Kishi Nobuo even called his Iranian counterpart to explain the extension of the MSDF's mission.<sup>76</sup> The strong emphasis on the "information collection" nature of the mission as well as the desire to maintain lines of communication, demonstrate Japan's signaling of its desire not to take sides against Iran. According to Japan's Ministry of Defense (MOD) website, the MSDF deployment itself is in order to protect the safety of Japanese ships by "strengthening Japan's information collecting capabilities."<sup>77</sup> MSDF vessels in the region can collect information on the size, speed, direction, and nationality of all incoming and outgoing vessels and readily provide them to Japanese merchant shipping. In doing so, they hoped to be able to detect suspicious vessels or early signs of dangerous situations.

Japanese sources seem fairly understanding of Abe's decisions, both to deploy the MSDF and not to join the US coalition. Considering the legal constraints of its constitution, some have expressed concern that the deployment would not be able to do enough to actually protect Japanese ships.<sup>78</sup> However, alienating Iran was the largest reason for Japan to avoid hitching itself to the US-led coalition. The MOD webpage, as well as a Japanese analyst, highlighted Iranian President Rouhani's positive reaction to Japan's announcement to not join the coalition.<sup>79</sup> This is presented as vindication that Japan's more even-handed course of action will ensure that it will be able to maintain good relations with both sides; indeed, Japan's MOD website frequently used the phrase "独自の取組" [independent initiative]. Additionally, the fact that the MSDF mission's geographical parameters exclude the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz (instead focusing on the Gulf of Oman) signals Japan's intention to consider Iran's sensitivities. Then-President Trump's "America First" attitude is another reason why Japan has been emphasizing its independent initiatives; to show the US that Japan is willing to do more and helping to shoulder the burden of Gulf security.<sup>80</sup> When the Biden administration indicated a desire to revive the JCPOA, Japan's Foreign Minister Motegi urged his Iranian counterpart during a phone call to adopt a "constructive approach" in response. Motegi continued stressing Japan's alliance with the US as well as traditionally friendly relations with Iran.

### **Japan and Intra-regional Asian Dynamics of Competition and Cooperation in the Gulf**

As the presence of Asian powers grows in the Gulf, there is some potential for cooperation between Japan and India in terms of maritime security, which is gradually developing. On the other hand, strategic competition with China has not extended to the Gulf region, and there is little indication thus far that such rivalry would develop. However, one example of potential investment and commercial competition between Japan and China was the South Azadegan oil field in Iran. The Japanese oil company Inpex was first granted a contract to develop the oil field in 2004.<sup>81</sup> Two years later, worried about possible US sanctions, Inpex reduced and eventually gave up its stakes. Shortly after, Iran gave the contract to China's CNPC.<sup>82</sup> However, CNPC was expelled in 2014 for not delivering the

expected output after five years of delay.<sup>83</sup> In 2016, Inpex once again tried to gain the South Azadagen contract but wavered yet again after the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.<sup>84</sup> The contract eventually wound up with Iran's state-owned Petropars, which subcontracted much of the work to several Chinese companies.<sup>85</sup> The whole affair demonstrated that when it comes to investing in Iran, Japanese entities remained subject to the whims of American sanctions while China is much less constrained (though not entirely so).

On the flip side, there are examples of Sino-Japanese collaboration on solar energy in the UAE, at least on a commercial basis. Both the Chinese Jinko Solar Holding and Japanese Marubeni Corp. are private companies working together as part of a consortium on the Noor Abu Dhabi, the largest individual solar power project in the world.<sup>86</sup> The Japanese government did not seem to play an active role in this particular case, but it has expressed multiple times its intention to diversify Japan's trade relationship with Gulf states beyond traditional energy sectors and played at the very least, facilitative roles.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the state-backed Japan Bank for International Cooperation, together with private banks such as Mizuho and Sumitomo, has provided project financing for green initiatives, such as waste to energy projects in Dubai and the Rabigh Solar Photovoltaic Plant in Saudi Arabia.

With growing competition from China for oil supplies since the turn of the century, Japan started strengthening ties with the Gulf. The 2000 Kono Initiative mooted by then-Foreign Minister Kono Yohei envisioned a multilayered relationship including political and security dimensions for the first time, alongside new areas for cooperation including culture, aviation, and technology.<sup>88</sup> In the grand scheme of Sino-Japan rivalry, the Gulf region (and Middle East in general) has taken a backseat to Southeast Asia and Africa. Investment and infrastructure competition between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure certainly exists in Southeast Asia and in Africa, but is less pronounced in the Gulf states. While BRI projects are growing rapidly in the region with multi-billion dollar deals, by contrast Japan's state-backed Bank of International Cooperation which had around half of its portfolio in 2007 in the Gulf states saw this decline to a quarter by 2020.<sup>89</sup> Although Japan is protective of its aid program to Palestine,<sup>90</sup> this sentiment doesn't seem relevant to the wealthy Gulf states. As for the prospects of Sino-Japanese economic cooperation, both countries convened the "Japan-China Forum on Third Country Business Cooperation" which was held in 2018. Of the 52 MOUs signed,<sup>91</sup> none were in the Middle East, much less the Gulf. Although there might be cases of private companies cooperating on their own, Sino-Japanese government efforts to bring companies and projects together seem to be narrowly focused on Southeast Asian countries like Thailand. As major oil consumers, both China and Japan are interested in securing long-term energy supply from the region.<sup>92</sup> Both have made investments in Gulf states' gas and oil fields while attempting to diversify their non-oil economic relationships.<sup>93</sup> Barring one instance in 2004, the investment push from Japan and China does not appear to be an effort to outflank the other, instead being relatively straightforward policy tools to maintain

good relations with the Gulf and ensure stable energy supply.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, both countries are wary of being involved in the internal and regional conflicts of the area.<sup>95</sup>

One element that might be a source of tension is Japan's growing military presence, in the Gulf and surrounding waters such as the Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Aden. For Japan, deployment of the MSDF in the Gulf and Indian Ocean is a matter of protecting its energy supplies carried on civilian ships and the freedom of maritime navigation through critical sea lines of communications.<sup>96</sup> However, China perceived these deployments as a thinly veiled excuse for Japan to remilitarize. Chinese media has harshly criticized changes in Japanese laws which allow wider SDF deployment abroad.<sup>97</sup> Some scholars point to competitive dynamics behind the establishment of China's naval base in Djibouti as a tit-for-tat response to Japan's earlier base built in 2011.<sup>98</sup> The proximity of Japanese and Chinese naval bases in Djibouti has been a source of some friction. In 2017, Chinese media alleged that three MSDF divers approached a PLAN warship to inspect it near the Chinese base in Djibouti (which the Japanese government denied).<sup>99</sup> In the same year, Japan slightly expanded its base (from 12 hectares to 15 hectares), allegedly due partly to Chinese presence.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, Japanese and French aircraft had flown over the Chinese base but stopped doing so in 2016.<sup>101</sup> All the other countries with bases in Djibouti (US, France, Italy) were initially skeptical of the Chinese presence. Although the potential for friction is still present, measures were taken on all sides to deescalate, including Japan.

Japan and India's tentative on-off joint investment talks regarding Chabahar port and industrial zone in Iran is often discussed as an attempt to counterbalance China's development of the nearby Pakistani port of Gwadar.<sup>102</sup> If India and Japan proceed to develop the Iranian port, this might be interpreted by China as being in direct competition with its BRI project at Gwadar port. At the time of writing though, Japan is not actively involved in Chabahar, and even so, it may be more interested in the commercial potential rather than any strategic or geopolitical concerns. However, due to increased pressure from the US, Japan has pulled back and the project does not seem to have proceeded since 2017.<sup>103</sup> Japan and India are focused on deepening economic ties, especially toward inviting Japanese investments and businesses to India.<sup>104</sup> In the security realm, Abe announced the "Democratic Security Diamond" initiative, which aimed for strong maritime security cooperation between Japan, India, Australia, and the US.<sup>105</sup> Since 2014, Japan has been an annual participant in the Malabar exercises, training side by side with the Indian Navy.<sup>106</sup> The shared strategic interests in the Indian Ocean can also extend to the Persian Gulf being critical waterways, although most of the Japan–India cooperation so far is focused on the Indian Ocean – evident with the Malabar exercises, the Quad – rather than the Gulf itself. Japan and India seem to be taking parallel approaches to Gulf security: both sent naval vessels to the area in 2019 when oil tankers were attacked; both declined to join the US-led coalition.<sup>107</sup> However, despite the strong ties between Japan and India, a framework whereby both countries can cooperate more coherently in Gulf security matters is missing.

Overall, Sino-Japanese competition in the Gulf is fairly limited in its current form. Both countries have similar energy interests and are cautious of being bogged down in internal conflicts. Besides energy needs, the Middle East (compared to Southeast Asia) is seen as a relatively low-priority for both countries in terms of development, infrastructure, and trade interests.<sup>108</sup> Doubtless both are watching the others' actions closely, but they are also rather averse to getting internal and regional conflicts.<sup>109</sup> Even though there is certainly the potential for competition (especially over access to energy sources and lucrative commercial contracts), both Japan and China have thus far demonstrated restraint. While Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Iran and other regional capitals in March 2021 sought to signal Beijing "can play a role where Western leadership has been lacking" amid "a rapid drift to the east by Iran,"<sup>110</sup> Japan's engagement with Iran under Abe by contrast had been viewed as too closely beholden to the Trump administration in the eyes of Tehran.

## Conclusion

The Gulf has been an arena where Japan as a major East Asian power has suffered indignities and reputational damage, from the 1973 oil shock to the 1991 Gulf War and then-PM Abe's 2019 attempt to mediate in US–Iran tensions. However, the Gulf's continuing strategic relevance in terms of both hydrocarbon and renewable energy (such as fuel ammonia), as well as growing non-oil trade with Japan means that it remains a region where Japan has to "walk the talk," so to speak. Touting its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision and "proactive contribution to peace" with strong emphasis on maritime freedom of navigation through Persian Gulf waterways, Japan eventually chose to dispatch MSDF destroyers for information collection missions in 2020. Deploying MSDF destroyers outside the ambit of the US-led coalition Operation Sentinel, however, reflects the hedging tightrope that Japan has long been walking. Maintaining immense economic interests and carrying no colonial baggage in the Gulf, Japan claims to be an "honest broker" maintaining good relations with all parties including regional heavyweights and rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Yet, Japan has not been able to effectively translate these advantages into leverage for shaping the regional security complex. Perceptions within the region (especially highlighted in Abe's visit to Iran) of Japan's bandwagoning on the US alliance continue to undermine some of its attempts to hedge and present itself as a more "independent" actor. It may thus be unreasonable and somewhat premature to expect Japan to step up and fill the strategic void left by the US turn toward withdrawal accelerated under the Trump administration. Reliant on the US alliance to combat pressing security threats in its home region of East Asia, Japan has also had to consider alliance burden-sharing demands from Washington when responding to developments in the Gulf, notably during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq as well as the Iran nuclear agreement. In this sense, the threat from North Korea became intertwined with Japanese calculations on deploying its Self-Defense Forces to Iraq for the stabilization mission.

Japan's predominantly economic and commercial heft in the region is reflected in the fact that Japanese sources mostly focused on energy security and economic development in the Gulf. Comparatively less was reported, at least in Japanese sources, on potential rivalry with China in the region. On the other hand, some English language sources were perhaps over-stating Japan's security interests and geostrategic competition with China in the Gulf. The Japan–India joint cooperation in the Chabahar port in Iran is often touted as an example of the potential rivalry with China over infrastructure projects. Yet, even this issue remains a fairly underreported topic which had, after all, stalled since 2017 at least on the part of the Japanese. Notwithstanding evidence of commercial rivalry in terms of jostling for oil contracts, there have at the same time been instances of Sino-Japanese collaboration by private and state-backed entities as part of large consortiums for UAE mega-solar projects. Japan and China in fact share common interests in a stable flow of energy supplies and the security of critical sea lines of communications. There appears little evidence thus far of Japan engaging in competitive balance of power policies vis-à-vis China in the Gulf. Japan has its hands more than full in its home region coping with China's rise. Extending that rivalry to the Gulf region may further stretch Japan's limited resources for no clear discernible gains, especially in a region of complex politics that both Beijing and Tokyo appear wary of getting too deeply embroiled in.

As for Japan's burgeoning relationship with India, both do share interests in maritime security and sea lanes of communication extending from the Persian Gulf to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean and beyond to Asia. India's strong cultural and commercial ties with the Gulf would certainly be supplementary to Japan's growing and rapidly diversifying non-oil presence. India's long-standing emphasis on neutrality also converges with Japan's hedging desire to be seen as an even-handed actor not taking sides in the Gulf. Despite Japan's participation in the naval Malabar exercises and growing defense cooperation, this has thus far not yet extended to concerted attempts by both New Delhi and Tokyo to shape Gulf regional security dynamics together. This lack of momentum in the security and defense domains mirrors the lackluster fleshing out of the ambitious Asia Africa Growth Corridor jointly promoted by Japan and India to great fanfare in 2017. Japan's desire, and more crucially its ability, to play a more significant security role in the Gulf concomitant with its commercial heft thus far raises more questions than answers.

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# **5 (De)securitization Narratives Behind the Independent Deployment of the Cheonghae Unit to the Strait of Hormuz**

*Hae Won Jeong*

What are the security debates that underlie the vector of South Korea's Middle East policy? How do domestic politics in South Korea affect the political constructions of securitization? This chapter examines the politics of security frames with reference to South Korea's decision to independently deploy the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz on January 21, 2020. The Cheonghae unit, which consists of a contingent of 300 troops, one destroyer, and one Lynx helicopter, was initially deployed to the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters as an anti-piracy unit since March 2009 but was later framed by the state as a redeployment by expanding the scope of operation to the Strait of Hormuz. Though the South Korean government legitimized its securitizing move as a compromise between the US and Iran in response to the US request to contribute troops to the US-led maritime coalition following oil tanker attacks in Gulf of Oman, this case study suggests that South Korea's Middle East policy was mainly driven by its effort to negotiate end-of-war declaration with North Korea. As South Korea's latest deployment to the Middle East, and the first dispatch for combat purposes, it provides a glimpse into the rupture in security framings of South Korea's state and society which derives from the divergent views on national interests and the 70-year legacy of the Korean War.

As a middle power neighboring China and Japan, South Korea's foreign relations have hitherto been disproportionately concentrated in a narrow set of countries and regions that include great powers that are geographically proximate to South Korea or were parties to Korean War.<sup>1</sup> Given that the US was South Korea's security guarantor and patron, South Korea's Middle East policy has been intrinsically tied to American grand strategy and the US foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Against the broader context of the fall of *Pax Americana*,<sup>3</sup> this chapter examines South Korea's evolving security interests in the Strait of Hormuz and its ability to straddle the divide between the US and Iran. As revealed through the prism of South Korea's media discourse and fragmented domestic politics, this chapter employs Copenhagen School's securitization theory to the question of South Korea's security interests in the Middle East. This chapter adopts a broader concept of security, as defined by Ole Wæver, that focuses on components of non-traditional security, namely the security of people that spans economic welfare, environmental preservation, cultural identity, and political rights, among others.<sup>4</sup> It sheds light on the widening gulf between locutionary and perlocutionary

speech acts of securitization under the administration of former President Moon Jae-In by juxtaposing conflicting accounts between traditional and nontraditional security considerations. By focusing on the implications of contentious politics over national interests and security concerns – which is where the source of controversy lies – this research considers the securitization debate on a national level. The units of analysis include political parties, government agencies, and civil society organizations, as embodied in the iterations of political and media discourse.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will contend that the rift between locutionary speech acts and perlocutionary speech acts over the South Korean government's decision to deploy the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz, as evidenced in the media discourse, suggests pluralistic, conflicting discursive accounts of national interests that dispel the myth of a monolithic vision of security on the Korean Peninsula, which is projected onto South Korea's Middle East policy.

This chapter is organized as follows: the first section lays the methodological groundwork for conceptualizing security and security threats. The second section sets out to analyze the political discourse of “national interests” and securitization discourse vis-à-vis South Korea's Middle East policy, specifically in the context of its engagement in the Gulf security subcomplex. This is followed by a survey on South Korea's history of deployment to the Middle East and a discursive analysis on partisan politics and securitization among five South Korean newspapers. The chapter concludes with reflections on the relationship between South Korea's Middle East policy and its commitment to US alliance, and the interconnectivity, or the lack thereof, between the securitization narratives on the Korean Peninsula and the Gulf security subcomplex.

## **Referent Objects and Existential Threats in Securitization**

The concern for survival is at the core of Copenhagen School's military-political conceptualization of security, which is specific to the domain of international politics.<sup>6</sup> According to this line of reasoning, in international politics, the state is the normative referent object that legitimizes state intervention – including the use of force – to counter existential threats.<sup>7</sup> Securitization is established through the referent object's declaration of security, which is conceived as speech act. As per the logic of securitization, the precise ontology of security threats is specific to the referent object, which ranges from political threats that challenge state sovereignty and legitimacy to nontraditional security threats concerning economics.<sup>8</sup> However, the question of existential threats is a nebulous issue considering the broader conceptions of nontraditional security. Independent of the domain of state sovereignty, security also intersects with societal issues as well as environmental politics.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, given the broad spectrum of securitizing acts, ranging from nonpoliticization and politicization, to nonsecuritization, securitization, and desecuritization, and the blurring of boundaries between public and private domains and state and societal issues, securitization is rendered a thorny issue.<sup>10</sup> By conceptualizing securitization as an intersubjective act, the speech act of existential threat is understood as a social construct.

However, in the military-political realm of security issues, the classifications of the discursive formation of security threats are far from conspicuous. Just as not all military issues are axiomatically securitized, not all security issues are strictly compartmentalized. South Korea's military deployment to the Strait of Hormuz traverses both traditional and nontraditional security domains of military-political security as well as human security. Moreover, the military-political issue comprises both latent and manifest issues of security that have been subjected to a multitude of securitizing moves by different referent objects. Therefore, clashes between traditional and nontraditional forms of security are inevitable given the hybrid characteristic of security in the context of South Korea's deployment to the Strait of Hormuz since February 2020. What results from this are conflicting intersubjective security agendas and narratives that suggest domestic polarization. South Korea's foreign policy priorities became disoriented by deepening domestic polarization. As a result, competing security agendas between political parties, civil society organizations, and non-state actors in domestic politics complicate the picture, where there is a shift in the referent object.<sup>11</sup> This implies that the state-centric nature of speech act in securitization is problematic. Floyd points out that the Copenhagen School's securitization theory suffers from a "constructivist deficit" and debunks the myth of a sanctioning audience and of reifying the utterances of an existential threat.<sup>12</sup> In practice, intersubjectivity is an elusive criterion for defining effective securitization when there are competing interests and priorities between state and society, and the securitizing agent disregards the perceptions of non-state actors and nuanced contexts.<sup>13</sup> The same applies to gauging public acceptance of securitization in the case of dispatching the Cheonghae unit. While successful securitization by the state implies popular consent, the South Korean government's decision to bypass parliamentary approval – on the grounds of tentatively expanding the operational scope of the Cheonghae unit from the Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Hormuz – sparked controversy.

Thus, notwithstanding that political disagreements over the deployment to the Strait of Hormuz are indicative of the politicization of security, it is dubious whether the securitizing move by Republic of Korea's Ministry of National Defense (henceforth ROK MND) was successful solely by way of taking the extraordinary measure of sidestepping legislative scrutiny. This is attributed to the deficiencies in establishing a normative ontological framework for latent security threats in the political constructions of security, and for failing to recognize that in reality, there are multiple, competing interests of security as applied to this case.<sup>14</sup> The two sections below delve into the discursive formations of security and insecurity as shown through the relationship between South Korea's competing interests in Middle East policy and political partisanship.

### **Securitizing South Korea's National Interests in the Strait of Hormuz**

Traditionally, the state has been the referent actor in securitizing the deployment to the Middle East. However, analogous to the dispatch for the 2003 Iraq War, the South Korean state's locutionary speech act of deploying to the Strait of Hormuz

faced staunch opposition by civil society organizations. This chapter suggests that the reasons for this are two-fold: first, due to undeclared conflict of interests in South Korea's Middle East policy between the US and Iran, whose relations deteriorated under the Trump administration after the withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and by the maximum pressure campaign. Second, the polemic constructions of security between the state and non-state actors in South Korea generated divergent national interests, which also reveals the rupture between locutionary speech acts, which are utterances of the securitizing move by the securitizing agent, and perlocutionary speech acts, which are the iteration that has a consequential bearing on the action of the audiences, in securitizing South Korea's Middle East policy.<sup>15</sup>

The politicization of South Korea's military involvement in the Gulf security subcomplex could be read through the prism of domestic politics. South Korean politics have been sharply divided along political partisanship between the conservatives and progressives, and to a lesser extent, socioeconomic inequality, age, and regionalism.<sup>16</sup> According to regional security complex theory, which assumes that the processes of securitization and the degree of security interdependence are more intense between actors internal to regional complexes than between actors external to regional complexes, South Korea's national interests have mainly revolved around security on the Korean Peninsula and the interactions with the global and regional powers in the Northeast Asian regional security complex (RSC).<sup>17</sup> Following the Vietnam War, South Korea's strategic pivot to the Middle East has been guided by its commercial and energy interests, which are non-military security concerns. ROK MND's announcement to deploy the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz in January 2020 thus faced domestic opposition, as the decision was anchored to a narrative of impending, non-existential security threats. These security utterances sought to override the counter-securitizing discourse of human security which escalated after the heightened regional tensions following the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 and of South Korea's economic and energy security in the region by jeopardizing South Korea's relations with Iran, a major oil producer. The aforementioned manifest security threats (i.e., locutionary speech act) are merely propositional utterances of the professed securitizing act and do not reveal the underlying motives behind the securitizing move.<sup>18</sup> Thus, given a plethora of security threats that have different magnitudes, the ineffective securitization of propositional utterances which are grounded on a non-existent security threat is seen as aggravating destabilization. Overseas military dispatches have been among the unpopular securitization moves initiated by the South Korean state and are highly politicized.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, by circumventing the institutional vetting of the National Assembly, the securitizing move lacked popular legitimization and effectively removed public accountability. Thus, as Balzacq alludes to the power-laden, state-centric construction of security, the South Korean state's securitizing discourse of the Strait of Hormuz closely mirrors the opaque, black box model in foreign policy analysis.<sup>20</sup> The decision ignored the domestic determinants of foreign policy that underscores the role of parties, interest groups, legislators, and public opinion and elections.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of ROK MND's discursive framings that tried to assuage Iran's concerns, ROK MND's military dispatch to the Strait of Hormuz touched a wrong nerve, as it signaled South Korea's military involvement in the global economic chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>22</sup> The issue is also political, as it was implicit that South Korea was forced to choose sides between the US and Iran when America's global reputation was at an all-time low.<sup>23</sup> Under the Park Geun-hye administration (February 2013–March 2017), South Korea benefited from a brief economic respite following the implementation of JCPOA in January 2016 during the Obama administration. Park became the first South Korean president to visit Iran in May 2016, wherein Park and former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani released the Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Partnership between the two countries, which outlined the strategic vision for economic, political, security and judicial, cultural, and educational cooperation.<sup>24</sup> Under the slogan of the “second Middle East boom,” which did not materialize, Iran quadrupled its oil exports to South Korea within the first four months after the sanctions were lifted in January 2016.<sup>25</sup> The short-lived economic relief in Iran was intended to revitalize South Korea's economic interests in the Middle East but virtually became defunct as Park was impeached for corruption charges and the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement.<sup>26</sup> After the JCPOA came into effect, Iran was a chief provider of cheap crude oil and a key market in the construction sector for South Korea. South Korea's import of Iranian crude oil was at its peak in 2017, which was also when it recorded the highest total crude oil imports by year since 1998. Iran's total share of crude oil imports in 2017 was 13.2% and South Korea's imports of Iranian crude oil increased by more than threefold between 2015 and 2017.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, Iran's share of Middle Eastern crude oil exports to South Korea was 16.19%, making it the third largest regional exporter after Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.<sup>28</sup> South Korea's bilateral relations with Iran have been pragmatic, focusing on strengthening their mutual interests in economic cooperation. Prior to the Trump administration, political discussions were mostly spoken on cordial terms by eschewing direct confrontations on nuclear developments in Iran and North Korea.

In political constructions of security, ROK MND took extra precautions to appease Iran by framing its securitization two ways: first, as a military deployment independent of the US-led maritime coalition and patrolling the global energy corridor to ensure freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for the transit of 70% of crude oil and 30% of LNG imported by South Korea;<sup>29</sup> second, as renewing the deployment of an existing naval anti-piracy operation by tentatively expanding the operational scope of the Cheonghae unit from Gulf of Aden and Somali waters to Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as discussed above, it is evident that South Korea's dilemma in maintaining a delicate balancing act between the US and Iran is what underpinned its securitization move, which also encapsulates latent security concerns (i.e., commercial tradeoffs and the North Korean issue). The differences between manifest and latent security threats are essentially the difference between locutionary acts and perlocutionary effects. The irrevocable divide between the illocutionary

speech act and the perlocutionary speech act in the South Korean context, as this chapter argues, suggests that the notion of security is a political construct.

## **South Korea's Middle East Dispatches and Its Commitment to US Alliance**

Independent of the propositional utterances of protecting South Korea's national interests in the Strait of Hormuz, South Korea's securitization of the military dispatch to the Middle East has shown path dependence. South Korea's first overseas troop deployment was during the Vietnam War at the request of the United States. Since then, with the exceptions of UN peacekeeping forces and the security cooperation with the UAE, South Korean dispatches to the Middle East have been aligned with US foreign policy in the Middle East. Though the escalating geopolitical tensions in the Strait of Hormuz have been framed as a manifest security threat, the latent security concerns that went unacknowledged in public were South Korea's security interests on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>31</sup> In accordance with the assumptions of regional security complex theory, it is contended that the main determinant behind South Korea's securitizing act is linked to the developments in the Northeast Asian RSC rather than the security concerns in the geographically remote Gulf security subcomplex. The emphasis on South Korea's alliance with the US is closely entangled with North Korea's nuclear program in the context of inter-Korean relations. However, there remains an enduring dissonance between the US and progressive-leaning South Korean governments, and the domestic frictions between the conservatives and the progressives regarding as to whether to recognize North Korea as a source of threat by the othering of North Korea.<sup>32</sup> The importance of South Korea's alliance with the US was demonstrated through a public opinion poll jointly conducted by think tanks in South Korea, US, Japan, and China in 2015, wherein 71% of South Koreans saw its relations with the US as "very important."<sup>33</sup> A recent survey released by the Korean Defense Research Institute in October 2021 reaffirms this, as the US was rated most favorably among the global and regional powers, which include the US, Russia, China, Japan, and North Korea (with the rating of 6.97 on a 10-point scale).<sup>34</sup> While South Korea's public opinion may agree on the relevance of South Korea-US alliance, the specific characteristics of the alliance are not immutable, and contingent upon the future of American power and the foreign policy positions of South Korea's ruling party and the incumbent presidents, and political partisanship. The North Korean nuclear threat also implies the extent to which South Korea is geopolitically pressurized on all sides – from regional and global powers – and particularly how it is bound up by the trajectory of US foreign policy in the Middle East and its commitment to the longstanding US alliance.

Military involvement is highly politicized and is treated as tantamount to political interference.<sup>35</sup> These issues are bound to be politicized when they concern securitization moves that are far removed from issues of defense on the Korean Peninsula and in the Northeast Asian RSC. The Middle East's strategic importance to South Korea since the 1970s is encapsulated in the maxim, "first Middle

East boom.” The latter has left a great imprint in the psyche of South Koreans as it corresponds to the period of South Korea’s rapid industrialization which is dubbed as “the Miracle on the Han River.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is an anomaly to frame security concerns in the Middle Eastern RSC in military-political terms, and not economic, in the consciousness of the South Korean public. This is also discordant with the image of South Korea as a middle power, which assumes that it is far more effective for South Korea to wield its influence through soft power (Lee and Park 2017, 22).<sup>37</sup> Mo suggests that South Korea has shown predilection for short-term commercial and security gains at the expense of long-term strategies in soft power.<sup>38</sup> However, the dichotomy between hard power and soft power ensconced in the abovementioned premise is not entirely correct. Not all types of military operations are offensive or are securitized; South Korea’s military dispatch to the Middle East were mostly non-combatant in nature (see Table 5.1). In keeping with the image as a middle power, which underscores multilateralism not solely as a means but as an end in and of itself, South Korea’s deployment is framed not solely in terms of the pursuit of national interests but as a means of serving the ideal of a responsible international actor.<sup>39</sup> The aim of promoting the image of a responsible international actor is also interlocked with the legacy of the Korean War.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the regional powers in the Northeast Asian RSC, offensive realism has not configured South Korea’s geostrategic calculus in the region. Instead, this chapter suggests that South Korea’s non-combatant deployments were completed at the request of the US in order to secure its latent security interests on the Korean Peninsula as a quid pro quo to US security arrangements in South Korea.

The vast majority of South Korea’s overseas deployments to 28 countries consist of UN peacekeeping operations or peacekeeping of multinational forces.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the deployment on January 20, 2020, South Korea’s dispatch of the Cheonghae unit to the Gulf of Aden fell under the latter category. However, its redeployment to the Strait of Hormuz was reframed as an independent naval

*Table 5.1* South Korea’s dispatches to the Middle East

Country	Contingent	Period	Purpose
Iraq	Seohee Unit	Apr 2003–Apr 2004	Peacekeeping of Multinational Forces
	Jaema Unit	Apr 2003–Apr 2004	
	Zaytun Division	Apr 2004–Dec 2008	
	Daiman Unit	Oct 2004–Dec 2008	
UAE	Akh Unit	Jan 2011–Present	Defense Cooperation Activity
Lebanon	Dongmyeong Unit	July 2007–Present	UN Peacekeeping Operations
Gulf of Aden, Somali Waters, Strait of Hormuz	Cheonghae Unit	Mar 2009–Present	Peacekeeping of Multinational Forces; Independent Deployment

Source: ROK Ministry of Defense (2016).

operation to release itself from the onus of political commitments. In spite of the nonbelligerent nature, widespread public disapproval of South Korean deployments to the 2003 Iraq invasion and Afghanistan (July 2010–June 2014) was, respectively, punctuated by the Yangju highway incident (2002), Korea–US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) negotiations, and the US–ROK beef dispute (2008) which sparked anti-US protests (Lim 2006). Heightened anti-US sentiments were compounded by media coverage of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse (2003), the abduction and execution of Kim Sun-il after demanding the withdrawal of South Korean troops from Iraq (2004), and the South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan (2007). The state failed to take into account the public opinion following the preceding incidents in their securitizing moves across the Roh Moo-hyun (February 2003–February 2008) and Lee Myung-bak (February 2008–February 2013) administrations. Responding to the US requests for overseas deployments intersected with vital questions of South Korea's nationalism, sovereignty, and legitimacy.<sup>42</sup> In spite of redeploying an existing naval unit to the Strait of Hormuz, the deployment, akin to the preceding dispatches, was imbued with political connotations.

Marred by the images of enduring geopolitical volatility in the Middle East and the unpopularity and illegality of the US-led invasions in the region, Middle East deployments are overgeneralized as belligerent. Although parallels are frequently drawn between the Vietnam War, the 2003 Iraq War, and more recently, the 2020 Strait of Hormuz deployment, these deployments each served different purposes. Whereas South Korea's Tiger Division was among the foreign troops that were involved in the Tet offensive of the Vietnam War, the dispatch to the 2003 Iraq War emphasized South Korea's contribution to Iraq's post-war reconstruction efforts. Regardless of the scale of conflict, the functional nature of these deployments matters; in the Middle East, the securitization of South Korea's dispatch to the Strait of Hormuz is disputable as it was read by the South Korean public as combat deployment as opposed to the non-combatant deployment to Iraq. Initially, the Korean public had not registered South Korea's 2003 Iraq War deployment in amenable terms. However, in October 2003 the Roh Moo-hyun administration succeeded in securitizing the deployment to Iraq, which was demonstrated by the turnaround in the public's opinion from a public opinion poll conducted by Korean Broadcasting System – which went from 60.5% against and 39.3% in favor in response to George W. Bush's requests for foreign troop contributions – to 56.3% in favor and 42.3% against on the eve of Roh's official announcement. The latter was attributed to framing national interests in terms of commercial incentives from participating in post-war reconstruction projects and by citing the UN Security Council Resolution 1511.<sup>43</sup> Thus, instead of merely implying South Korea's absolute commitment to the US in asymmetric ROK–US alliance, it follows that successful securitization was abetted by framing the national interests in a manner that corresponds to the audiences' cognitive frame of reference. However, it is worth noting that effective securitization is often untenable and is subject to shifting contexts. While Park aptly pointed out that there was a reversal of public opinion on the eve of

the Iraqi invasion, as the war dragged on, elite polarization and the polarization of domestic public opinion only intensified along political partisanship, including over the legislation on additional troop deployment to Iraq. The latter, when combined with the initial troop deployment, was the largest overseas deployment of South Korean troops and the third largest foreign troop contribution to the US-led coalition in Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

### **Fractured Securitization: A Discursive Analysis of Partisan Politics**

Political contentions over the Cheonghae unit's deployment to the Strait of Hormuz not only pitted the state against society, but divisions also pervaded among political parties and civil society along political and party lines. While elite partisan polarization and public opinion polarization are common denominators for securitizing South Korean troop deployments both to Iraq and the Strait of Hormuz, the extent to which the South Korean government's securitizing narrative was promoted explicitly on the grounds for supporting the ROK-US alliance waned relative to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which was also prior to the US retracting from the global stage.<sup>45</sup> The Moon Jae-in administration's decision to deploy South Korean troops in 2020 has more to do with addressing the latent security concerns on inter-Korean relations than it is about strengthening its alliance with the US. The differences between the 2003 and 2020 deployments reflect the shifting trajectory of the ROK-US alliance which could be surmised on three counts: first, the power vacuum resulting from the decline of the American hegemony and the increasingly multipolar regional and global order; second, the economic and political costs incurred for South Korea by the maximum pressure campaign under the Trump administration; third, the progressive government of Moon Jae-in and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea calling for an end-of-war declaration. While the Moon administration's securitizing move partially qualifies as securitization since the state framed the issue as a security concern, the extent to which the securitization is successful is disputed as the manifest security concerns on which the securitizing move is grounded on is denied by the politicians and civil society as an existential threat to the referent object.<sup>46</sup> As the media discourse below will demonstrate, the Strait of Hormuz deployment represents an amalgam of multifaceted, competing discourses of latent security concerns and national interests that are political, political-militaristic, and economic.

#### **(a) Media Framings of Securitization and Partisanship**

Media discourses on the South Korean government's securitizing move of its Middle East dispatches are divided along political lines. To make sense of the social and political constructions of securitization, this section analyzes the discursive formation of the Moon administration's securitizing move along the securitization spectrum by five major South Korean newspapers – *Chosun Ilbo*,

*Donga-Ilbo, Joongang-Ilbo, Kyunghyang Shinmun, and The Hankyoreh* – between July 2019 and January 23, 2020.

The pretexts for securitizing the Moon administration's decision to independently dispatch the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz were primarily established on the grounds of tentatively expanding the operational scope of the Cheonghae unit to protect the security of 25,000 South Korean expatriates in the Middle East in the case of emergency, and the pursuit of South Korea's national interests as a way of ensuring the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. Aside from political and ideological differences, both conservative and progressive newspapers attributed the dispatch as a compliance to US request. Fundamentally, the state's securitization was delegitimized by the public as both sides viewed ROK MND's securitizing move as an initiative of the Trump administration, which is tantamount to an external imposition of Trump's securitization of the Strait of Hormuz in conjunction with the maximum pressure campaign. Therefore, the legitimacy of the South Korean government's securitization of the Strait of Hormuz was brought into question, revolving around the issues of: (1) South Korea's commitment to US alliance and the implications of "independent deployment"; (2) the extra-legality of circumventing parliamentary scrutiny; (3) the implications for rising geopolitical tensions with Iran in the Gulf security sub-complex; (4) the Moon administration's ability to leverage the deployment as a way of currying favor for North Korean issues.

First, it is evident that the Moon administration's announcement on 21 January 2020 to independently dispatch the Cheonghae unit by tentatively expanding its operational scope from the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz was a political construct, as it was revealed by media outlets that the decision was likely made by Cheongwadae's National Security Council during the ROK-US Foreign Ministers' Meeting on January 14, 2020 prior to the official announcement on January 10, 2020.<sup>47</sup> The same was also said about informing the Iranian counterpart in advance of the official announcement.<sup>48</sup> While South Korea's overseas deployments at the request of the US has historically been supported by the conservatives, their response to the government's decision was ambivalent whereas the progressives were staunchly opposed to the government's securitizing move. The conservative newspapers interpreted the Strait of Hormuz deployment as inevitable for fulfilling South Korea's commitment to the US alliance specifically with regards to shouldering more burden-sharing costs as an importer of energy that transits through the Strait.<sup>49</sup> They equally shed light on the US role in maintaining General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in the wake of South Korea and Japan's trade dispute in 2019.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, the progressive newspapers focused on raising questions about the implications of "independent deployment" and the Cheonghae unit's future coordination with the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).<sup>51</sup> *Chosun-Ilbo* suggested that deploying the Cheonghae naval unit independent of the IMSC command would satisfy neither the US nor Iran, whereas the progressive sources argued that it showed partiality to the US.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, it was clearly perceived as a political decision given the uneconomical logic of dispatching troops independent of the

IMSC command and having to maintain a delicate balancing act between the US and Iran.<sup>53</sup>

Second, both political spectrums opposed the Moon administration's bypassing of parliamentary procedures. The reasons behind the criticisms, however, somewhat diverged between the conservative and progressive newspapers. The conservative newspapers cited politicians from the opposition party to claim that it was a tactical ploy to preclude political criticism over the controversial decision ahead of the 2020 legislative election.<sup>54</sup> Regardless of political views, both sides disputed the government's securitizing narrative which defended a mere expansion of the operational scope of the Cheonghae unit's anti-piracy activities from the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. Instead, it was argued that the deployment to the Strait of Hormuz bore little resemblance to the anti-piracy activities conducted in the Gulf of Aden and Somalia, and should be considered as a deployment of combatant troops, which would require parliamentary consent.<sup>55</sup> In gauging the geopolitical risk in the Strait of Hormuz, there was widespread skepticism as to whether the Cheonghae unit's contingent of one destroyer, one Lynx helicopter, and no more than 320 troops would be sufficient to carry out the operations in the Strait.<sup>56</sup> The question of requiring parliamentary consent is innately linked to the geopolitical ramifications of the maximum pressure campaign, which will be discussed further below.

Third, the controversy surrounding the nature of troop deployment, which was debated extensively, was closely intertwined with South Korea's dilemma over a multitude of security considerations. In addition to South Korea's commercial interests in Iran, the tentative expansion of the Cheonghae unit's operational scope, as noted above, did little to allay the misgivings of the skeptics who argued that deploying the Cheonghae unit would exacerbate South Korea's political and strategic insecurity. More specifically, there were qualms about geographically dispatching troops to the Strait of Hormuz, especially by the ruling party and progressive-oriented outlets, which claimed that it would raise South Korea's risk of becoming an Iranian target. Whereas the Japanese Self-Defense Force's (SDF) geographical reference of its deployment was worded broadly as the "Middle East" and excluded the Strait of Hormuz, South Korea's operational scope unambiguously included the Strait of Hormuz. The counter-securitizing moves by the progressive outlets, and to a lesser extent the conservative ones, raised the possibility of a domestic backlash and jeopardizing its relations with Iran. This was later demonstrated when Iran's Revolutionary Guard seized the MT Hankuk Chemi on January 4, 2021 over frozen Iranian funds. Eventually, all parties acknowledged the relevance of the government's securitizing discourse; fundamentally however, the progressives dismissed the government's actions by delegitimizing Trump's maximum pressure campaign as the pretext for dispatching South Korean troops to the conflict-prone Strait.<sup>57</sup> Prior to the official announcement, more attention was drawn to benchmarking Japan's independent dispatch of its maritime Self-Defense Force to the Northern Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf of Aden, whereas after the official announcement, progressive newspapers focused on leveraging on

the North Korean issue. While both spectrums recognized the importance of capitalizing on South Korea's alliance with the US for different ends – with the conservatives advocating for resolving the trade dispute with Japan and buttressing longstanding ties with America and the progressives seeking to negotiate the end-of-war declaration and propose individual tourism to North Korea – US credibility for mediating in regional affairs in the Northeast Asian RSC has diminished. As opposed to the conservatives that see the value in making the symbolic move of strengthening the South Korea-US alliance, the progressives are fundamentally opposed to dispatching the troops overseas and delegitimized the Moon administration's policy as having no functional value, with the costs outweighing the benefits.

**(b) The Polarization of Civil Society**

With reference to the deployment of the Cheonghae unit, elite partisan polarization – as manifested through the political and media discourse – is consistent with the historical views of political partisanship whereas South Korea's public opinion is divided along party lines. As a result, South Korea's opposition party and conservative newspapers have conferred support for the state's securitization narrative as opposed to the ruling party, which have opposed all forms of troops deployed overseas at the US request. By contrast, the public opinion oscillated before and after the official announcement, with popular sentiment initially conforming to the historical patterns of political partisanship before the state's securitization to shifting to aligning with party lines after the securitization. As was with the 2003 Iraq War, this is evidenced from the shift in a public opinion poll conducted on the Strait of Hormuz dispatch by Realmeter Korea. According to the poll, the public opinion shifted from 48.4% against and 40.3% for, to 51.9% in favor and 33.1% against two days after the decision was officially announced by the government.<sup>58</sup> When compared with the outcome of the public opinion poll in Iraq, the opposition rate is substantially less. However, a petition opposing the dispatch was submitted to Cheongwadae, which was supported by 5,289 people, and the progressive newspapers reported that South Korean civil society organizations, including People Who Open Peace and Unification, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, People's Solidarity for Social Progress, and 90 other organizations were opposed to the asymmetric ROK-US alliance and called for the withdrawal of deployment.<sup>59</sup> This was contrasted with the conservative outlets which juxtaposed these reports with pro-US demonstrations held in Gwanghwamun Square.<sup>60</sup> The poll results do not adequately capture the public's opinion today after the seizure and release of MT Hankuk Chemi since no public opinion poll was conducted following the renewed deployment of Cheonghae unit in 2021.<sup>61</sup> The effective securitization by the South Korean state is therefore dubious as there is no consensus on South Korea's position on North Korea and national interests; rather than seeing eye to eye on security concerns, the South Korean public opinion is divided along party lines.

## Conclusion

South Korea's tentative and independent deployment of the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz is a securitizing act that reveals contentious domestic politics. The securitizing act by the South Korean government was a response to latent security concerns on North Korea and South Korea's commitment to its alliance with the US. The securitization of the Strait of Hormuz is disputable, as there is no consensus on national interests, let alone security issues on the Korean Peninsula. The basis for supporting the Moon administration's securitization is established by upholding the value of revitalizing the ROK-US alliance rather than recognizing the geopolitical tensions in the Strait of Hormuz as an existential threat, as prescribed by the maximum pressure campaign. South Korea's preemptive securitizing move of protecting South Korean residents in the Middle East in the case of emergency is refuted through counter-securitizing narratives by skeptics who claim that the government's decision endangers the state's political security, human security, and economic security, especially given that the Cheonghae unit was the first case for South Korea to dispatch a battleship for an overseas troop deployment amid escalating tensions between the US and Iran.

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# **6 The Strategic Culture in Singapore**

## **Impact on Relations with the Gulf**

*Li-Chen Sim*

In 2005, Goh Chok Tong, a Senior Minister at that time and former Prime Minister of Singapore, described Singapore's relations with Saudi Arabia as "limited."<sup>1</sup> This was partly a reference to the narrow scope of trade at that time – over 85% of bilateral trade comprised Singapore's imports of Saudi oil – despite the fact that the kingdom accounted for a respectable 2.2% of Singapore's total trade turnover and was the latter's largest trade partner in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Goh's remark was in line with other assessments at that time that the region was "never high on Singapore's foreign policy priorities"<sup>3</sup> and that "for many Singaporeans, the Middle East remains something of a mystery."<sup>4</sup>

Fifteen years later and a more purposeful engagement with the Gulf is evident. Two examples stand out in particular: Singapore became the first (and thus far only) country to enter into a free trade agreement with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 2013; and in 2019, Singapore signed a declaration of Comprehensive Partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). What explains the improvement in relations between Singapore and the Gulf and how sustainable is it?

One explanation for this improvement in relations draws upon qualitative and data-rich claims that the 21st century is an Asian one.<sup>5</sup> Cross-border flows in trade, investment, knowledge, higher education, migration, and culture point not only to the increasing primacy of the Asian region in global terms but also to the Asianization of the GCC. The latter refers to the trend in the GCC of shifting key patterns of interaction away from traditional partners in regions such as North America and toward Asia. For instance, Oman sent 81% of its crude oil to China in 2019 up from 35% in 2000;<sup>6</sup> in the UAE, 59% of its expatriate labor force is from South Asia, up from 26% in 1980.<sup>7</sup> Given that the GCC is arguably the most Asianized part of the Middle East,<sup>8</sup> the implication is that Singapore's improving relations with the Gulf may simply have co-evolved as part of the trend of Asianization.

Framing the improvement in Singapore–Gulf relations in terms of Asianization is, however, simplistic for several reasons. First, it does not account for the periodization in Singapore–Gulf relations, which improved markedly after the second half of the 2000s. Second, the Asianization paradigm assumes that engagements between Northeast Asia or South Asia and the GCC – which are the focus of extant

literature on Asia–Gulf relations – are representative of Southeast Asia–GCC relations.<sup>9</sup> In fact, trade between the latter declined between 2000 and 2016 in contrast to the booming trade between Northeast Asia/South Asia and the GCC.<sup>10</sup> There are also nuances in the level of engagement between individual Southeast Asian and Gulf states that are not easily captured by referencing Asianization. For instance, trade with Saudi Arabia as a share of Singapore’s global trade is declining; conversely, Singapore’s trade with the UAE has increased six-fold since 2000 (see Table 6.1). Third, there is a dearth of scholarly work that systematically examines Singapore–Gulf ties, let alone research that assesses the applicability of the Asianization paradigm to this bilateral relationship. Finally, the Muslim population in Northeast Asia is far less significant than in the Southeast Asian region (42%); the impact of Islam on bilateral relations is therefore different.

This chapter adopts an outside-in approach to analyze the extent to which Singapore’s engagement with the Gulf is shaped by various security-related developments in the latter such as conflict with Iran, intra-GCC tensions, weak states in the region, terrorism, port and maritime security, and arms procurement.<sup>11</sup> It draws largely upon qualitative analysis and quantitative data from sources in Singapore, including interviews with former and serving senior government officials, academics, and business people. In view of the limitations of the Asianization paradigm discussed above, the chapter adopts an approach grounded in foreign policy analysis. The first section provides the relevant theoretical overview according to which domestic sources, in this case Singapore’s strategic culture of ‘vulnerability,’ frames the conduct of foreign policy. The second section presents a granular analysis of Singapore–Gulf relations along three pathways: public order, economic prosperity, and energy security. It finds that while insecurity in the Gulf prompted the initial impetus for Singapore to engage

*Table 6.1* Singapore’s Trade with Its Top Three Gulf Partners (in US\$ Billions)

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Imports from Saudi Arabia	4.3	9	11.2	7.9	8.4
Exports to Saudi Arabia	0.3	0.4	0.8	1.0	0.9
Total trade with Saudi Arabia	4.6	9.4	12.0	8.9	9.3
Saudi Arabia’s share of Singapore’s total trade	1.7%	2.2%	1.8%	1.4%	1.2%
Imports from UAE	1.5	2.5	6.4	8.2	11.5
Exports to UAE	1	3.7	3.8	5.3	4.0
Total trade with UAE	2.5	6.2	10.2	13.6	15.5
UAE’s share of Singapore’s total trade	0.9%	1.4%	1.5%	2.1%	2.1%
Imports from Qatar	1.1	2.4	5.5	3.5	5.4
Exports to Qatar	0.03	0.1	0.2	0.2	1.0
Total trade with Qatar	1.13	2.5	5.7	3.7	6.4
Qatar’s share of Singapore’s total trade	0.4%	0.6%	0.9%	0.6%	0.9%

Source: Direction of Trade Statistics, International Monetary Fund.

the Gulf states in the 21st century, the use of statecraft to minimize the condition of ‘vulnerability’ has largely mitigated perceptions of Gulf insecurity and instability. The third section concludes with some thoughts about the outlook for maintaining the momentum in relations between interlocutors on the fringes of Asia.

## A Strategic Culture of ‘Vulnerability’

According to the classic schema by Singer, the conduct of states in international affairs may be analyzed at the international, state, and individual levels.<sup>12</sup> Scholars of international relations interpret the broad features of the international system – such as Realism, Constructivism, Asianization – and their impact on state behavior, while specialists in foreign policy analysis focus on the domestic sources of decisions at the national, subnational, and individual levels that influence a state’s conduct in foreign affairs. This chapter aligns with the latter approach, which has spawned a voluminous literature on the role of bureaucratic politics, regime type, interest groups, leadership styles in enabling or constraining the foreign policy decision-making process.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular relevance for the purposes of this chapter is the impact on foreign policy of a nation’s strategic culture, that is,

a set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.<sup>14</sup>

As a product of numerous contributing factors such as history, geography, reification, and political socialization, a nation’s strategic culture therefore becomes internalized or “encultured” among its citizens as a set of core beliefs that inform policies on foreign, defense, and security policies.<sup>15</sup> The effect is to “predispose societies in general and political elites in particular toward certain actions and policies over others” as suggested by the classic practice of ‘bounded’ rationality.<sup>16</sup>

Strategic culture undergirds a wide range of country-specific studies of foreign policies among developed and developing countries as well as among major powers, middle powers, and small countries. Its application to Singapore is relevant to key debates in the literature in several ways as the rest of the chapter makes clear.<sup>17</sup> First, the ‘vulnerability’ on which it is based is homogenous, persistent, and ingrained among the country’s leaders, civil service institutions, and also citizens. There is no discernible alternative subculture partly due to the fact that the same political party has held unbroken power since independence and has engaged in ‘enlightened authoritarian’ practices. Second, strategic culture filters, but does not determine, policy choices. Singapore’s leaders are not dogmatic realists but pragmatic. To address ‘vulnerability,’ for instance, both deterrence and diplomacy are deployed;<sup>18</sup> high defense expenditures exist alongside strong support for international law.

Singapore's strategic culture revolves around the city-state's 'vulnerability' in terms of size, ethnicity, and location following its traumatic exit from Malaysia. It is one of the smallest countries in the world at 559 square kilometers at its founding in 1965 and 718 square kilometers today due to land reclamation. Being small means the country lacks strategic depth to defend itself from an invasion by ceding territory to buy time. It also suffers from a small domestic market and a lack of natural resources, a condition that can only be overcome by embracing the world as its hinterland; this means that "the business of government is business."<sup>19</sup> Size matters, according to Goh, because

[r]unning the United States is like being in command of an aircraft carrier. You will not capsize. Steering a small and young country is more like shooting rapids in a canoe. We are at the mercy of the external elements.<sup>20</sup>

As a consequence, "Singapore does not have much of a safety margin: the place is too compact. There is no room for the waywardness that larger nations take in their stride."<sup>21</sup> Singapore's policymakers must therefore always be vigilant, forward-looking, stay ahead of trends, and remain relevant to as many global stakeholders as possible.<sup>22</sup>

Singapore's smallness is worsened by the fact that its immediate and much larger neighbors bore historical ill-will against what they regarded as an ethnic Chinese-majority "parasitical city-state" that lived off and profited from trading in the Malay archipelago, a sentiment that still persists according to a Singapore official as recently as 2015.<sup>23</sup> Indonesia's former leader dismissed Singapore as a 'little red dot' in 1998, groups in Malaysia and Indonesia occasionally threaten to cut off vital supplies of water and gas to Singapore, and maritime and air borders are ongoing sources of conflict. As a result, these two countries continue to be Singapore's principal external security concerns even as they are its primary trade partners.<sup>24</sup> The country's policymakers therefore prioritize societal unity to build resilience against external attempts at religious-based politics since "it is playing with fire and this will destroy multi-ethnic Singapore if it gets out of hand."<sup>25</sup>

The validity of the 'vulnerability' narrative has, however, come under scrutiny. One argument reflects the debate among scholars of foreign policy analysis about the utility of studying strategic culture since it merely serves an instrumental function. Persistent allusions to internal and external threats are said to justify support for authoritarian state structures and practices that have underlined the country's poor rankings in indices of political and civil freedoms.<sup>26</sup> A second argument accepts the vulnerability of the early years but questions its relevance today. Accordingly, Singapore's limited room for maneuver in international affairs, as predicted by the concept of a 'small state,' has been expanded by improvements in military prowess which have endowed Singapore with the best firepower in Southeast Asia after Indonesia; advances in water management techniques have also reduced the earlier heavy dependence on imported water from Malaysia.<sup>27</sup>

The chapter does not seek to assess the veracity of claims about 'vulnerability,' only to highlight that policymakers past and present perceive the condition to be

self-evident.<sup>28</sup> One official noted its leaders may be “paranoid but not paralysed” while another has warned young Singaporeans about the dangers of dismissing ‘vulnerability’ as a mere myth and tool of control.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, the Singapore Story, based on the memoirs of the country’s first Prime Minister and grounded in national vulnerability, constraints, and fragile success appears to serve as “foundational scripture” that “preserves the survivalist mentality well into the present.”<sup>30</sup> Having set out the framework for this chapter within foreign policy analysis and discussed the multiple dimensions and policy implications of Singapore’s ‘vulnerability,’ the chapter will now address how the country’s strategic culture feeds into appraisals of (in)security in the Gulf and with it, Singapore–Gulf relations.

### ***Public Order***

Singapore’s strategic culture was rudely jolted by the events of September 2001 in the US and the discovery later that year of plans by a Southeast Asian group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), for terrorist attacks in Singapore. During the 1970s and 1980s, the country’s armed forces had evolved strategies to deal with the its susceptibility to external aggression but the 2001 events made clear that the distinction between domestic and external threats to Singapore’s national security needed to be urgently reconsidered.<sup>31</sup> Al Qaeda’s link to the JI plot was established with the discovery of a videotape in Afghanistan by US forces. JI targets in Singapore included public transport, the international airport, water pipelines, foreign embassies, and US-related military and civilian assets; the resulting disorder would facilitate JI’s goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the region. Cell members, some of whom were religious teachers in Singapore, were arrested shortly thereafter. Since then, other individuals from the Muslim population in Singapore have been detained, including self-radicalized persons without formal affiliations to extremist groups. Apart from JI, other groups operating in Malaysia and Indonesia also target Singapore for “drinking the blood of Muslims” on account of its close association with the US and tough stance against terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore’s veteran diplomat, argues that Singapore’s outreach to the Gulf in the 2000s was a “defensive” response to 9/11, the JI plot, and Middle Eastern influences on Islamic culture in Singapore and Southeast Asia.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of the JI plot, Singapore leaders expressed worries about the “growing displacement of Southeast Asian Islam by a more inward, more exclusive version of Middle East Islam.”<sup>34</sup> They suggested this was linked to the spread of Wahhabi influences from the Gulf, the building of mosques and Islamic schools funded by Gulf petro-dollars, the igniting of the Sunni-Shia rivalry after 1979, as well as the framing of the Afghan and other conflicts in the Middle East as ‘jihad.’<sup>35</sup> The subsequent controversy in Singapore in 2002 over the wearing of headscarves in state-run schools and the disquiet among some Muslim citizens about the country’s support for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 further strained relations between the government and its Muslim population. It also increased tensions within Singapore’s Muslim community because of divergent views held by its key stakeholders.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to note that concerns about growing Islamism in Singapore pre-dated 9/11 and the JI plot. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of parents have chosen to send their children to *madrasahs* (schools that provide Islamic education) over national secular schools.<sup>37</sup> In 1999, there was a polarizing debate over the quality of *madrasahs*, with some Muslims accusing the Singapore government of a desire to close them. Additionally, the rise in neighboring Malaysia of the theocratic Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) since the 1980s and the race to out-Islamize PAS to win voter support was perceived by Singapore leaders to have an undesirable effect on the city-state's Muslims, who accounted for 14.7% of the population by religious affiliation. A case in point was the 1986 visit of Israel's president to Singapore. The Singapore National Malay Organization penned an editorial criticizing the Singapore government's decision to proceed with the visit despite fierce objections from various political, social, and religious groups in Malaysia, which does not recognize Israel; some of its members also gathered outside the presidential palace in an attempt to hand over a protest note.<sup>38</sup> Such concerns reflected a wider wariness over declining levels of inter-racial harmony and societal unity and had resulted, prior to 2001, in the government introducing ethnic quotas for public housing in 1989 to prevent the emergence of ethnic enclaves and in the 1990 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act that legislated against political activism by religious leaders and organizations.

9/11 and the JI plot crystallized the fragility of Singapore's social peace. The Singapore government realized it had to respond urgently with a holistic strategy to defend and maintain public order in the world's most religiously diverse country.<sup>39</sup> At home, this included rehabilitation of detainees, reforms in madrasah education, licensing of religious teachers, and the introduction of a new National Security Strategy with closer coordination between defense and homeland ministries.<sup>40</sup> Externally, nearly 1,000 personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) were deployed in a United Nations-mandated operation to restore stability to Iraq between 2003 and 2008; almost 500 personnel served in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2013 under the International Security Assistance Force. Since 2014, the SAF has also participated in the US-led global coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS) by contributing medics, imagery analysts, combat trainers, and naval and air equipment to operations in Iraq. As a result of these deployments, SAF worked alongside militaries from the Gulf states thereby engaging in 'defense diplomacy.' The latter, as explained by an SAF Major General, compensates for Singapore's lack of territorial strategic depth since "if and when we do have to face a hostile country, having other countries that are friends with us also increases our response options."<sup>41</sup>

On the political front, Singapore initiated the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED) format in 2004 to include "voices of moderation" in the two regions in a world rife with "polarization of opinion about religion";<sup>42</sup> it hosted the first meeting in 2005. As a follow up to AMED, Singapore established Regional Training Centers in Doha (2006) and Jordan as well as a Regional Institute for Infrastructure Development in Muscat (2012) to share the country's expertise in public policy with mid-level officials in the region. Run by the Singapore Cooperation Program

within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these centers have attracted more than 2,300 participants from the six Gulf states thus far; the three-fold increase in participants since 2010 is especially noteworthy.<sup>43</sup> Although the policy transfer effect of these courses appears to be minimal, limiting participants to mid-level (rather than managerial) bureaucrats under 50 years old provides a longer time period during which Singapore may reap the potential benefits of official interactions.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Singapore's resident diplomatic presence was increased from three to eight in the Middle East and North Africa excluding Israel – of which six are in the GCC.<sup>45</sup> The Middle East Institute Singapore was also created in 2007 to provide scholarly and policy research on regional issues to the government.

For Singapore, the transnational nature of global terrorism suggested the need for greater and more direct government-to-government ties with Gulf states; these would complement the commercial ties that have been largely under the purview of multinational corporations and privately-owned companies in Singapore. In so doing, Singapore would be able to better understand the multiple and nuanced sources of Islamist revivalism whether from Europe or the Middle East. The political and military outreach noted above was also in line with Singapore's strategic culture of 'vulnerability.' In response to concerns raised about overseas deployment particularly in high-risk regions, the country's defense minister pointed out that "ground zero for the export of terrorists must be eliminated as we did in Afghanistan...For Iraq, for ISIS, we had a much more vested interest because there were foreign fighters from Malaysia, from Indonesia, from Singapore who were there."<sup>46</sup> What is less publicly acknowledged is that they are probably also "a 'showcase' of the SAF's expeditionary capabilities in a low-profile manner."<sup>47</sup> Recalling that Lee, the first Prime Minister, had argued for Singapore to send peacekeepers to East Timor – because "if we don't go, our neighbors will think we are 'scaredies' and therefore, that we can be trampled on" – a similar logic applies to missions in the Gulf.<sup>48</sup> The persistent "haunting fear" of Singapore's policymakers with regard to the intentions of Malaysia and Indonesia hence conceivably shapes foreign policy behavior in the Gulf.<sup>49</sup>

The recent, more muscular foreign policies of some Gulf states are potentially of concern in view of the impact on public order in Singapore.<sup>50</sup> Cases in point include the arrest in 2016 and 2020 of four Singaporeans who traveled to Yemen to fight with the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis, the detention of a Singapore Muslim who had plotted to kill Jewish worshippers in order to help the Palestinian cause, and the statement by the Indonesian Ulema Council that the Abraham Accords concluded by Bahrain, the UAE, and Israel were a betrayal of the Muslim people. For the most part, however, there has been no large-scale blowback from citizens with Arab and Iranian heritage regarding Singapore's official position on Gulf-related conflicts. Singapore-based companies, for example, have been heavily fined for undermining global UN and unilateral US sanctions on Iran.<sup>51</sup> Part of this has to do with their small numbers and hence limited clout. For instance, the Hadrami community originating in South Yemen is around 10,000 strong out of 5.7 million in Singapore and links with the homeland have frayed in favor of a 'Singapore' identity.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the tiny number of Shia amidst an

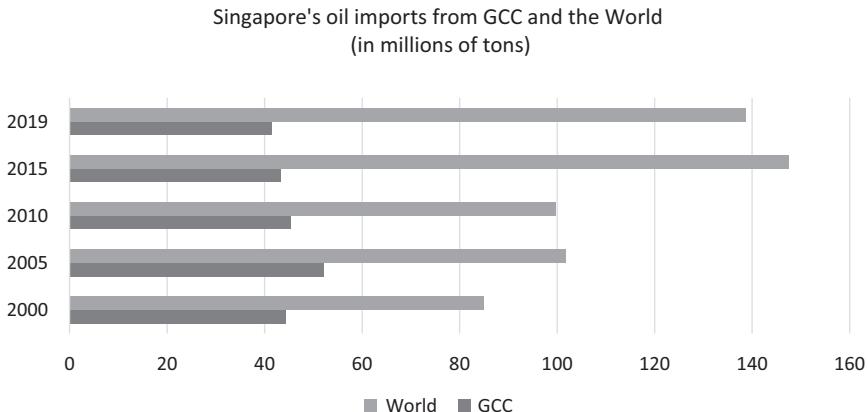
overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population in Singapore weakens any potential sectarian divide. More importantly, foreign policy and national security in the Singapore context is a “state-centric and elite-driven” and opaque process.<sup>53</sup> This, together with a public that has one of the highest levels of trust in government in the world and ‘very high’ levels of restrictions with regard to religion result in little sustained civic participation.<sup>54</sup> Although online discussion forums tend to be more lively, there is no evidence that they impact on traditional forms of political participation in Singapore.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Economic Prosperity***

Trade is important for most countries, none more so than Singapore where trade exceeds GDP by almost three and a half times on average over the past decade, a level surpassed only by Luxembourg.<sup>56</sup> Singapore’s very survival and prosperity is contingent on an open, rules-based trading system where the global market place mitigates the constraints of a limited domestic market. Consequently, the country’s foreign policy is aimed at “having the widest spread of economic links with the largest number of countries, that is, the world, so that the economic levers will not be in the hands of a few governments.”<sup>57</sup> The oil trade is particularly significant. Oil (crude and oil products combined) is the second largest item of merchandize trade by value, accounting for 23.7% of the country’s total imports and 18.6% of exports in 2018.<sup>58</sup> Like its oil-poor Asian counterparts, Singapore sources much of its crude oil from the Middle East; unlike them, however, the Middle East is also a significant source of oil products for Singapore, most of which are blended and/or re-exported by oil traders based in Singapore to the rest of the Asian region. This is because Singapore is the world’s largest bunkering (or marine fuel) port, it is among the five largest exporters of oil products, and it is one of the top oil trading hubs in the world; oil-related activities in Singapore contribute around 5% of GDP.<sup>59</sup>

The significance of trade for Singapore, the fact that over 80% of global merchandize trade by volume is seaborne, and the one-third share of GCC oil in Singapore’s total oil imports (see Figure 6.1) suggest that security challenges in the Gulf may be pressing concerns.<sup>60</sup> These include attacks on ships in port and in transit as well as the effect on sea lane security caused by a possible reduction in US military presence in the region. For example, in December 2020, the Singapore-flagged oil tanker *BW Rhine* was discharging its cargo at Jeddah port when it was hit by an explosive-laden boat; in June 2019, the *Kokuka Courageous*, a tanker with oil products from Saudi Arabia bound for Singapore was attacked in the Straits of Hormuz; and in May 2015, the *Alpine Eternity*, a Singapore-flagged chemical tanker, was fired at by Iranian naval vessels while transiting the Straits of Hormuz. These incidents render vulnerable Singapore’s economic vibrancy and support for international law including freedom of navigation, two principles that are part of the country’s core foreign policy.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, Singapore is not unduly preoccupied with maritime security in the Gulf. There are several reasons for this. First, attacks on ships in the Gulf are



*Figure 6.1* Singapore's oil imports (crude and products) from the GCC. Source: BP's Statistical Review of World Energy, various years.

relatively rare compared to Southeast Asia, which is the location of nearly half of global incidents of piracy and armed sea robbery.<sup>62</sup> Between 2016 and 2020 for example, an average of 89 incidents occurred in Asia each year, a figure that is far lower than previous years.<sup>63</sup> Maritime attacks, especially in Southeast Asia but also in the Gulf, are hence considered as ‘routine’ business risks and covered by maritime insurance. War-risk premiums for ships sailing near the Gulf have been imposed since 2019 but these are typically a fraction of the value of the oil or petrochemical cargo.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, Singapore maintains the fifth largest registry of ships in the world, with Singapore-flagged vessels comprising 5% of all ships.<sup>65</sup> Attacks on Singapore-flagged ships in the Gulf or elsewhere are hence inevitable. To deter attacks, Singapore joined the Gulf states in supporting anti-piracy naval patrols in the Gulf of Aden as part of the US-led Combined Task Force 151, which was helmed by Singapore on at least three occasions.<sup>66</sup> Between 2009 and 2014, Singapore completed at least nine CTF-151 missions.<sup>67</sup> For decision-makers in Singapore, participation in anti-piracy patrols underlines its relevance in global security and paves the way for future reciprocity should the need arise in Southeast Asian waters.

Third, insecurity in the Gulf actually benefits certain segments of the oil business in Singapore. Singapore's bunker sales have increased thanks to ship owners who wish to minimize time spent refueling at Fujairah in the UAE even if they have to pay premium prices in Singapore; in 2020, sales of marine fuels rose by 5% in Singapore while they shrank by almost 18% in Fujairah.<sup>68</sup> The attacks on four oil tankers in May 2019 just outside the port of Fujairah and the lower shipping demand due to the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain likewise worked in Singapore's favor.

Fourth, chronic instability in the Gulf cannot override the fact that Gulf national oil companies are cost competitive and reliable suppliers of oil.<sup>69</sup> In fact, noted an oil analyst,

it's much less risky to be dependent on Saudi Arabia than West Africa. In West Africa, a civil war results in pipeline sabotage, Shell proclaims force majeure, and importers do not get contracted volumes.<sup>70</sup>

While the GCC's share of Singapore's oil imports has fallen from almost 50% in 2000 to 30% in 2019 (Figure 6.1), this is less a reflection of insecurity in the Gulf than the emergence of new and cost-effective suppliers from Iraq (another Gulf state) and the US happy to backfill declining Saudi supply to the city-state. Crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia have fallen significantly over the past two decades because the kingdom has privileged exports to China, the largest importer of crude oil in the world. At the same time, Singapore's imports of oil from the UAE have increased and since 2011, the UAE has outstripped Saudi Arabia not only as Singapore's top oil supplier but also its main trade partner in the Gulf (see Table 6.1).

Fifth, Singapore's trade with the GCC is in line with the impetus to be not just a regional hub but a global city to escape the vulnerabilities emanating from smallness and location. This approach, introduced in the early 1970s, has been consistently reified.<sup>71</sup> In this regard, negotiations that began in 2007 for a Singapore-GCC free trade agreement (SGFTA) took place at a time when Singapore was losing patience with the slow progress in Southeast Asian regionalization following the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998.<sup>72</sup> During the late 1990s and 2000s, a plethora of bilateral free trade agreements was discussed and concluded, including the SGFTA which was signed in 2008 and came into effect in 2013.<sup>73</sup> Singapore's robust trade with the UAE is testament to the greater degree of non-oil diversification in the UAE (see Table 6.2) and to its keenness to engage relative to other

*Table 6.2 Export Product Concentration for Singapore, GCC, and Other Comparators*

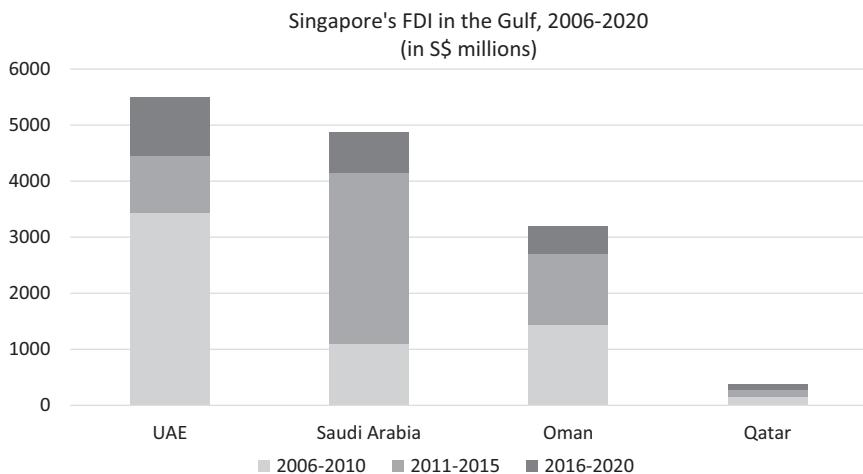
Country	2000	2019
Singapore	0.261	0.229
Malaysia	0.219	0.218
Iraq	0.974	0.916
Bahrain	0.411	0.296
Kuwait	0.625	0.669
Oman	0.802	0.413
Qatar	0.603	0.484
Saudi Arabia	0.670	0.590
United Arab Emirates	0.463	0.264

Source: UNCTAD database.

Note: The closer to 0 the Herfindahl-Hirschmann Index, the more diversified the range of exports.

Gulf states; this has opened up more avenues for trade. Joint high-level committees between Singapore and Oman (beginning in 2004), Qatar (2006), and the UAE (2014) meet annually to provide the respective foreign ministries with more direct and systematic oversight over bilateral relations instead of leaving them to the private sector or to ad-hoc contact between ministries. Similar committees have been mooted with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait but they have not been inaugurated.

Sixth, the fact that there are relatively few Singapore-owned assets in the Gulf means the security environment is less consequential. Singapore companies like Rotary Engineering and Trescorp have undertaken engineering, procurement, and contracting work to build oil storage tanks in Fujairah and Jebel Ali (in the UAE), in Jubail (Saudi Arabia), and in Duqm (Oman); ST Marine of Singapore built and delivered four naval patrol vessels to Oman's navy between 2014 and 2016. The absence of equity in these projects means the commitment of Singaporean companies ends when final payment is received. Concord did acquire equity stakes in its oil terminal project in Fujairah but subsequently divested them. Keppel's joint venture N-KOM shipyard in Qatar, SembCorp's investment in Oman's Wilayat Mirbat Independent Water and Electricity Plant, and SATS's joint cargo venture with Oman Air are exceptions; however, Oman lies outside of the main areas of conflict in the Gulf and is hence a lower-risk investment. Although the Gulf's real estate and hospitality sectors have attracted the bulk of Singapore's foreign direct investment (see Figure 6.2), data from the *Financial Times* indicates a recent focus on business services.<sup>74</sup> Examples include Singapore government-linked company Crimson Logic's automation of Qatar's customs administration system, ship design services provided by ST Marine to Abu Dhabi Ship Building for



*Figure 6.2* Singapore's foreign direct investment in selected Gulf countries. Source: fDi Intelligence.

four patrol boats for the UAE navy, and the opening of Group IB's cybersecurity Middle East regional headquarters in Dubai.

Finally, Singapore understands that challenges to its prosperity and sustainability as a global economic hub – for finance, re-exports, auxiliary business services, oil, logistics, transport, and tourism – do not stem exclusively from the evolving security situation in the Gulf. Admittedly, Fujairah has risen steadily to be the second largest bunkering port but its bunker sales are only a fifth of Singapore's; Dubai is the world's busiest airport in terms of international passenger traffic but Singapore is a far busier hub according to the number of destinations served.<sup>75</sup> With Singapore ranked the third most attractive city for talent competitiveness versus the top ranked Gulf city (Dubai) at 51st position, it is clear that the more serious challenges to Singapore's hub status are its high-cost base and competitors in Asia.<sup>76</sup> In this regard, China and India's large-scale forays into the downstream oil business, sometimes in collaboration with Gulf states seeking to lock in crude oil demand, are especially worrisome.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the “fiscal constraints in the Gulf make costly new downstream investments less likely and so reduce for now the strategic threat posed by such investments.”<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the massive storage capacity in India and China are “more about enhancing energy security than in making these countries oil hubs that compete with Singapore.”<sup>79</sup> Singapore continues to be the most open and competitive economy in the world<sup>80</sup> and it hosts a critical mass of difficult to replicate interlocking activities that support multiple hub functions. Going forward, the country's attempt to establish itself as a hub for liquefied natural gas (LNG) and for ammonia bunkering to decarbonize shipping is likely to further enhance its relevance to global trade networks and to differentiate itself from potential rivals in Asia and the Gulf.

For these reasons, Singapore tends to be rather sanguine about maritime and other conflicts in the Gulf and their impact on economic opportunities. Relative to the vulnerabilities faced by Singapore in Asia, insecurity in the Gulf appears to be of a lesser and more manageable magnitude. In any case, economic globalization – and its unavoidable risks – appears ingrained as a way to address the country's limited domestic market.

### ***Energy Security***

Singapore is the most energy-insecure country in the world;<sup>81</sup> it has no indigenous sources of energy save for tiny amounts of solar power and has to import all of its energy needs. From Singapore's perspective, oil for domestic consumption is less of an energy security issue than gas. This is because it has a wide diversity of oil suppliers albeit geographically clustered in the Gulf, it completed an oil-to-gas switch for power generation by 2010, and it has access to commercially stored oil in the event of an emergency.<sup>82</sup> Gas, which accounts for 95.6% of the city-state's fuel mix for electricity generation, is a huge concern because over 70% of it is piped under long-term contracts from Indonesia and to a smaller extent Malaysia, the two countries with whom Singapore has close but fractious relations and who remain Singapore's key security concerns, as noted earlier. Various actors in

Malaysia and Indonesia have on occasion called for gas sales to Singapore to be reduced or eliminated, but no quick-fixes were available to Singapore then. This was partly due to the lack of cost-effective alternatives: at that time, the global average cost of utility-scale solar power was \$359 per megawatt hour (MWh) compared to \$83/MWh for baseload gas-fired power stations.<sup>83</sup>

To address its dependence on piped gas, Singapore decided in 2006 to diversify into LNG. The country's first terminal became operational in 2013 and imports began shortly after (Figure 6.3). The decision was also aimed at putting into motion a new ambition to be Asia's LNG hub through regional trade and by refueling LNG-enabled ships; this could allow it to stay a step ahead of regional rivals aspiring to compete with Singapore as an oil hub. As explained by Kausikan, Singapore "can only remain relevant, survive and prosper by continuing to be an outlier. We cannot be just like our neighbours ... To be relevant we have to be extraordinarily successful. But this does not endear us to our neighbours."<sup>84</sup>

This 2006 decision opened the door for the Gulf to play a role in Singapore's energy security. That Singapore's first commissioning cargo of LNG – used to cool the terminal to prepare it for full commercial operations – was from Qatar Petroleum (QP) may foreshadow future developments. In 2018 and 2019, Australia was Singapore's largest LNG supplier followed by Qatar; volumes from the latter will increase since state-owned Pavilion Energy recently signed a deal with QP to deliver up to 1.8 million tons of LNG per year between 2022 and 2032. From Singapore's perspective, the planned addition of a second LNG terminal plus an increase in the number of LNG importers interested to leverage on QP's keenness

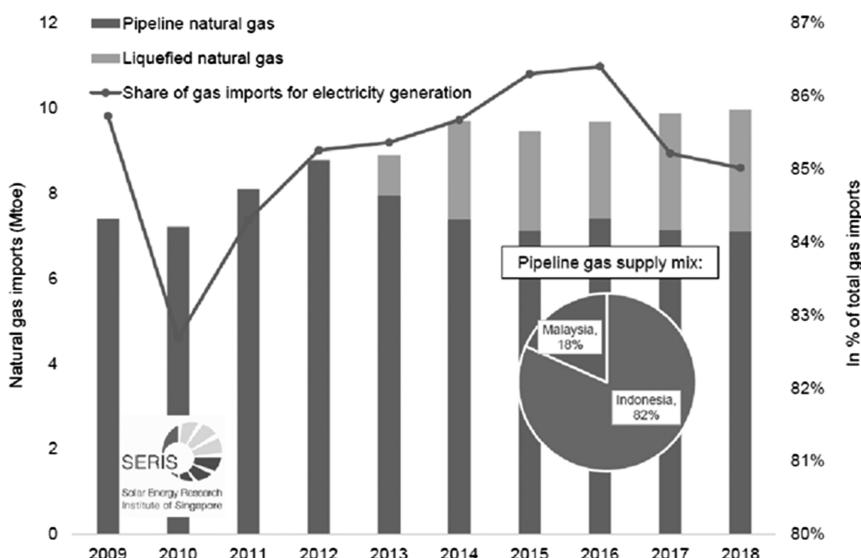


Figure 6.3 Gas imports into Singapore. Source: Paton et al., *Solar Economics Handbook of Singapore*, p. 27. SERIS.

to find homes for its massive LNG capacity expansion will diversify gas supplies and thereby enhance energy security.<sup>85</sup>

LNG is expected to account for half of Singapore's gas imports by mid-2020s. With the expiry of some piped gas contracts, the future for LNG exporters, including those from the Gulf, looks bright.<sup>86</sup> Qatar and, to a smaller extent, Oman are likely to play a bigger role than their other GCC counterparts with regard to Singapore's domestic energy security. This is firstly because they are the only two GCC states that are net gas exporters; Qatar also has the advantage of being the lowest cost LNG producer in the world.<sup>87</sup> In comparison, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are focused on achieving domestic gas self-sufficiency for power and industrial requirements.<sup>88</sup> Secondly, there is very limited room to switch out of gas and into lower carbon energy sources because Singapore is "alternative-energy challenged."<sup>89</sup> For instance, despite solar's cost-effectiveness today, severe land constraints and solar capacity factors limit solar uptake; the use of small modular reactors to generate nuclear energy is not yet commercially viable; while switching to electric vehicles only shifts dependence on the type of fossil fuel imports from oil to gas. Admittedly, the risk of a renewed intra-GCC conflict cannot be discounted. But because Qatar and Oman can access international waters via the Strait of Hormuz without crossing Saudi, Emirati, or Bahraini national waters, a maritime blockade did not and will not affect imports of Qatari (or Omani) LNG into Singapore.

The analysis in the previous paragraph suggests that hydrogen, apart from its potential in bunkering, is likely to play a significant role in Singapore attempts to decarbonize its domestic power mix. Specifically, blending low amounts of green hydrogen (or hydrogen formed from renewable energy sources) with natural gas in power plants will reduce carbon emissions without the need for costly retrofitting of power grids. Toward this end, several feasibility studies on importing liquefied hydrogen are being conducted.<sup>90</sup> Although it is early days, the potential supplier is likely to be Australia, UAE, or Saudi Arabia given their ambitious roll-out of solar-powered hydrogen projects. This would open up a new dimension in Singapore–Gulf engagement.

## Conclusion

This chapter has framed Singapore's approach to relations with the Gulf states within the context of the country's own strategic culture. Singapore does not perceive the Gulf security environment to be a deal-breaker because the region's opportunities and challenges are filtered through the lens of the city-state's 'vulnerability.' Singapore–Gulf relations in the 21st century have "evolved from an initial defensive interest into a positive engagement today."<sup>91</sup> The establishment of multiple channels of direct state-to-state interactions on diplomatic, military, and economic fronts complement the more traditional, commercially based interactions between Singapore and the Gulf states. They also somewhat mitigated critiques from the Gulf in early 2000s that Singapore was "viewing the Arabs through others' eyes ... direct contact can help in removing misconceptions."<sup>92</sup>

Going forward, for reasons of public security and order in Singapore, the city-state's leaders will continue to place a high value in connecting with Gulf countries that promote moderate Islam while embracing multi-faith engagement in the belief that inclusiveness is a “ballast against divisive ideologies.”<sup>93</sup> In this regard, the UAE’s strong stance against extremism of any kind, along with the construction of the Abrahamic House in Abu Dhabi which contains a mosque, synagogue, and church, finds parallels with public prayers for safety before Formula One races by members of the ten major religions in Singapore. Having put in place a comprehensive national security structure to minimize threats, the best it can hope for outside its borders is to support moderates in the Gulf to check the appeal of extremist behaviors. To further its economic prosperity and hub status, Singapore sees value in the emergence of sector-specific hubs in the Gulf and in linking up with them in a “chain of cities” or nodes that together shape the global economy.<sup>94</sup> Although Dubai, Fujairah, and Duqm have first mover advantage, Saudi Arabia’s Neom city could eventually join up as a regional hub for green innovation. As for domestic energy security, Singapore has applied Winston Churchill’s observation that certainty and security “lie in variety and in variety alone” to its power needs by diversifying sources of imported gas. Toward this end, it expects to reduce dependence on piped gas by increasing uptake of cost-effective LNG from Qatar and elsewhere.

Ultimately, unlike countries in Northeast Asia, Singapore is not and will not be a major player in the Gulf. Nevertheless, compared to the early 2000s, it has significantly broadened and deepened its engagement with individual Gulf states and with the region as whole.

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## **7 India in the Gulf**

### Multialignment in the Shadow of Regional (In)security

*Md. Muddassir Quamar*

The question of regional security and stability in the Persian Gulf has always resonated among academics and policymakers because of the significance of the region in the international system. The age-old centrality of the Gulf for global maritime trade notwithstanding, hydrocarbon resources, discovered in the 1930s and 1940s, made the Persian Gulf the cynosure of global energy politics and a theater of international geopolitics. Fossil fuels brought petro-dollars, wealth, and prosperity but created tensions, rivalries, and external interests as well generating security challenges and fears of regional instability.<sup>1</sup>

The United States (US), through building alliances and partnerships with regional states and deployment of substantial military resources, achieved a regional security architecture benefiting not only the weaker regional states but also America's allies and partners in Europe and Asia.<sup>2</sup> Though Washington had its share of challenges, including, for example, the 1973 oil embargo or managing relations with a belligerent Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 revolution, it managed to keep the situation under control as the regional hegemon by adopting flexible and pragmatic policies with regional partners and use of the military option with foes.<sup>3</sup>

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the US-led military action against the Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1990–1991 created impressions of a unipolar world and a lasting US hegemony in the Persian Gulf. Such projections, however, did not last long. The 21st century brought newer dynamics with the rise of Asian economies in the form of China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the Southeast Asian nations.<sup>4</sup> As the world moved toward multipolarity, or in the words of Amitav Acharya a “multiplex global order,”<sup>5</sup> the significance of the Persian Gulf did not diminish, not least because of the hydrocarbon resources, but also for its centrality in global maritime trade and emergence as an international business hub.

The continued importance of the Persian Gulf necessitated that emerging Asian powers, including India, develop partnerships with regional countries. It led to a flourishing of trade, economic, business, political, and security relations between the Asian powers and Persian Gulf states.<sup>6</sup> This, together with the US policy of ‘pivot to Asia’ under the Barack Obama administration (2009–2017) and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, created

the impression of an imminent change in the regional order.<sup>7</sup> Under the Donald Trump administration (2017–2021), the ‘maximum pressure’ policy against Iran and the president’s unpredictable foreign policy generated anxieties over regional security among friends and foes alike. Decisions such as the killing of General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 heightened fears of the outbreak of a regional war.<sup>8</sup> For President Joe Biden, the Middle East is not a priority because of the need to focus on domestic issues as well as on containing China. Nonetheless, Persian Gulf security is likely to remain a concern that would demand attention of the Biden administration.<sup>9</sup>

The impression of a declining US appetite for ensuring regional security on its own has given rise to discussions about a collaborative regional and international approach for a regional security architecture.<sup>10</sup> The talks are yet to translate into anything substantive on the ground and the US remains the lone global power with the ability and willingness to commit tangible military resources for security and stability in the Persian Gulf.<sup>11</sup> Along with this, the growing engagement of global powers such as China, and to some extent Russia, and postures of regional powers are affecting the way Asian powers, including India, are shaping their foreign policy in the Persian Gulf.

Notably, during the first two decades of the 21st century, India has significantly enhanced its engagement with Persian Gulf states, and hence cannot remain immune to developments affecting the region. Indian policymakers and strategic thinkers increasingly perceive the Gulf as a region of greater strategic relevance.<sup>12</sup> This chapter examines how India perceives the question of security and stability in the Persian Gulf as affecting its strategic interests. It underlines that India’s multialigned policy in the Persian Gulf region is being challenged by the evolving regional security situation and because of the global geopolitical developments, forcing India to rethink its foreign policy in the Gulf.

Conceptually, the chapter locates Indian foreign policy within the context of Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism wherein states tend to seek security through balancing in an anarchical international system.<sup>13</sup> Indian foreign policy is driven by the need to enhance national security vis-à-vis the threats from China and Pakistan and ensuring fast economic growth to attain ‘leading power’ status in the international system. In the Persian Gulf, this translates into India focusing on developing economic and security partnerships with Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), toward ensuring energy security, attracting foreign investments, and pressurizing Pakistan to mitigate security threats emanating from it. At the same time, India continues to engage Iran primarily to ensure energy security and for connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

India’s multialignment policy in the region is being challenged by regional and international geopolitics. Rising tensions between Iran and its regional foes in the Gulf as well as the Middle East, such as Israel with which India has strong bilateral relations, together with India’s approach to an increasingly assertive China is forcing it to reassess its policy toward the Persian Gulf. At the systemic level, India is seeking partnership with the US and balancing China’s rise, especially

with regard to Beijing's growing footprints in the Indian Ocean Region. Therefore, India has become amenable to working more closely with the US and its regional allies, and this has affected its bilateral relations with Iran.

## **India and the Gulf**

India is no stranger to the Persian Gulf and the region is no stranger to India. Thanks to geography and history, the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf region have shared close cultural and trade contacts.<sup>14</sup> Until 1947, the northwestern parts of India shared a land boundary with Iran resulting in cultural bonds and frequent human interactions. The western coastal regions of India share a maritime boundary with the Arabian Peninsula, leading to millennia-old trade and commercial linkages, people-to-people contacts, and socio-religious exchanges. British India maintained close contacts with the Gulf region and the British mandates in the Arabian Peninsula were administered through Bombay (now Mumbai).<sup>15</sup>

After independence, India did not invest much capital in developing political and commercial ties with the Persian Gulf leading to the region becoming peripheral in India's West Asia (Middle East) policy.<sup>16</sup> This was caused by two important factors: one, the broader foreign policy direction of India that looked at the world through the lens of anti-colonial solidarity,<sup>17</sup> and two, concerns in New Delhi over Pakistan's close relations and identification with Persian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Post-Cold War Shifts in Indian Foreign Policy***

The post-Cold War recalibration in Indian foreign policy<sup>19</sup> brought a significant change in the attitude of Indian policymakers toward the Persian Gulf region. The driving factors for this change were the economic and commercial potential of developing ties with regional countries and India's external dependence for its energy security.<sup>20</sup> Gradually, New Delhi undertook concentrated efforts at developing political contacts with the Gulf countries. India first reached out to Oman and Iran, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991–1996) visited Muscat and Tehran in June and September 1993, respectively. The visits were reciprocated by President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran in April 1995 and Sultan Qaboos of Oman in April 1997.

These exchanges laid the foundations for the future trajectory of Indo-Iranian and Indo-Omani relations. More high-level political and diplomatic exchanges took place subsequently including the visits by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's to Oman (August 1998) and Iran (April 2001) and the visit of President Mohammad Khatami of Iran as chief guest for India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2003.

In the meantime, India began developing political contacts with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani visited New Delhi in April 1999 and the Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh visited Riyadh in January 2001. The breakthrough came in 2006

when King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia visited India as chief guest for Republic Day and the two countries signed the *Delhi Declaration*<sup>21</sup> laying the foundations for strong bilateral ties and eventually signing the *Riyadh Declaration* in 2010 during the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declaring the beginning of “a new era of strategic partnership.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Bilateral Trade and Energy Security**

The gradual improvement in political contacts in the 1990s and 2000s proved the catalyst for a monumental growth in trade and commercial relations (Figure 7.1). By the early 2000s, the Gulf had emerged as one of the largest regional blocs in India’s external trade. For example, India’s total trade with the Persian Gulf in 1990–1991 was a meager US\$350 million, and by 2000–2001 it grew to reach US\$6.5 billion. In 2005–2006, India–Gulf trade had reached US\$20 billion and as of 2009–2010, it had crossed US\$100 billion contributing nearly 25 percent of India’s total external trade. As of 2019–2020, India–Gulf trade has swelled to nearly US\$155 billion.<sup>23</sup>

The most important component of the India–Gulf trade was – and continues to be – India’s petroleum imports from the region. In 1991, India finally decided to open its economy and adopt liberalization and privatization to overcome economic difficulties of the past. India had experienced a perpetually low growth at less than 2% in the 1980s with a GDP at US\$266.5 billion, a foreign debt at US\$70 billion and forex reserves falling to a mere 15 days’ worth of imports in 1990.<sup>24</sup> Economic liberalization began a new era of economic growth and this meant that the need for energy shot up exponentially in the coming decades. For

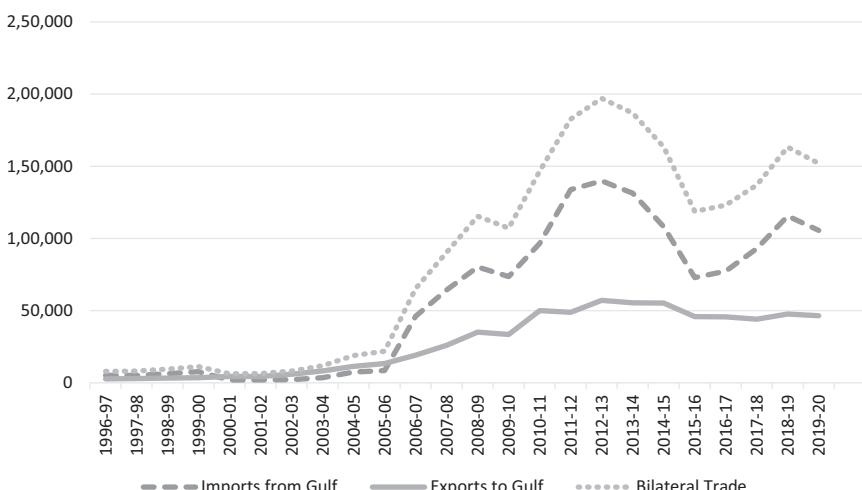
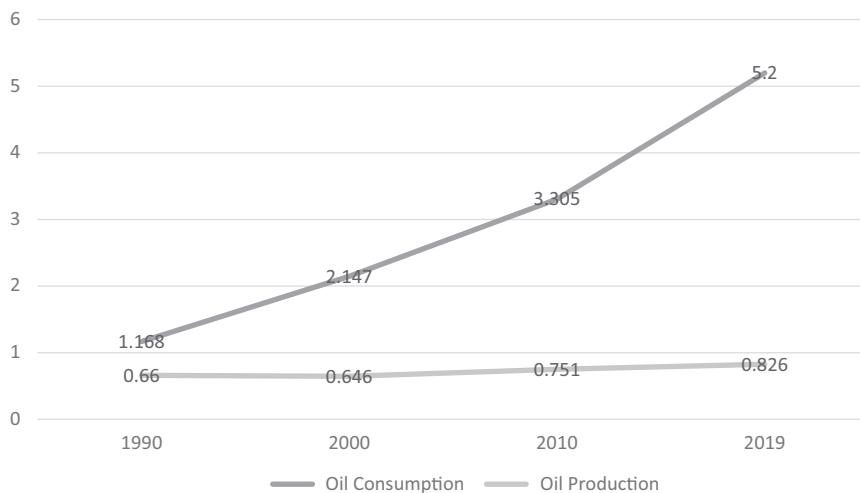


Figure 7.1 India–Persian Gulf bilateral trade (US\$ million). Source: Directorate General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.



*Figure 7.2* India's crude oil consumption and production (million barrels per day). Source: United States Energy Information Administration and British Petroleum.

example, in 1990, India's crude oil consumption was 1.16 million barrels per day (bpd) and after a decade in 2000, it increased to 2.147 million bpd and as of 2019, the oil consumption reached 5.2 million bpd.<sup>25</sup> But during the same period, India's crude oil production witnessed only a marginal rise to reach 826,000 bpd in 2019, which meant that India's dependence on energy imports grew manifold.

During this period, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, and the UAE emerged as the mainstays of India's energy security. The energy trade between India and the Gulf has continued to grow ever since, and as of 2019–2020, the region contributes nearly 53% of India's overall hydrocarbon imports (Table 7.1). Though in comparison to the past the share of the Gulf has dropped, the region remains the single-largest source for petroleum imports to India, and the mainstay of India's energy security.<sup>26</sup> The share of oil imports in bilateral trade between India and the Persian Gulf remains around 55%.

### ***Migrants and Remittances***

The flow of Indian human resource to the GCC countries too has played an important role in India's policy planning toward the Persian Gulf.<sup>27</sup> The mutuality of interests between India and the Gulf countries made this significant bridge in India–Gulf ties even at a time when the political and diplomatic engagements were limited due to geopolitical factors and foreign policy choices. This harmony of the interests – Gulf countries' requirement of labor and India's need for remittances and foreign direct investment (FDI) – continues to be an important facet of Indo-Gulf relations. The trend began after Indian independence with Indian

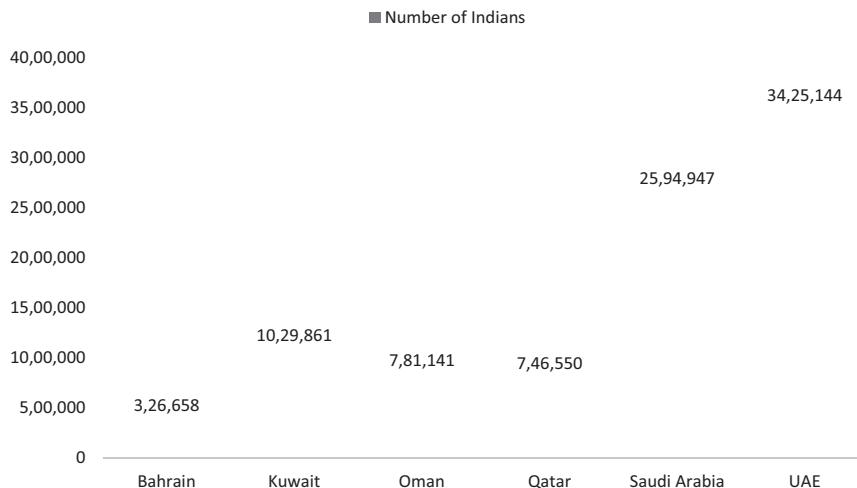
*Table 7.1 India's Oil and Gas Imports from the Persian Gulf, 2015–2020 (US\$ million)*

<i>Country</i>	<i>2015–2016</i>	<i>2016–2017</i>	<i>2017–2018</i>	<i>2018–2019</i>	<i>2019–2020</i>
<b>Bahrain</b>	94.07	46.94	69.12	118.94	113.42
<b>Iran</b>	4,461.57	9,006.29	9,232.61	12,369.07	1,013.52
<b>Iraq</b>	10,759.19	11,633.29	17,544.32	22,300.67	23,674.07
<b>Kuwait</b>	4,059.61	3,455.54	6,121.36	6,427.71	5,879.57
<b>Oman</b>	584.67	390.56	2,880.79	1,685.15	1,838.78
<b>Qatar</b>	7,942.43	6,762.10	7,207.82	9,270.34	8,431.48
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	15,177.91	15,583.08	17,816.06	24,508.68	23,157.24
<b>UAE</b>	7,912.80	9,457.60	9,080.71	13,656.84	16,196.71
<b>Yemen</b>	0.01	0.00	138.02	0.00	0.00
<b>Oil and gas imports Gulf</b>	50,992.26	56,335.40	70,090.81	90,337.40	80,304.79
<b>Total oil and gas imports</b>	96,953.02	103,163.16	132,294.57	167,871.82	153,646.40
<b>Gulf's share in total oil and gas imports (%)</b>	52.59	54.60	52.98	53.81	52.26

Source: Directorate General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

workers and professionals migrating to find employment in the growing petroleum industry. It picked up pace after the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s as oil-driven wealth led to an exponential growth in the number of urban centers in the Gulf.<sup>28</sup> Indian migrants found the swelling demand for unskilled or semi-skilled labor in the domestic and real estate sectors as an attractive way of earning a livelihood.<sup>29</sup> Hence, from nearly 123,000 in 1975, the number of Indians residing in the Gulf in 1980 increased to 700,000 and grew to 1.5 million in 1991.<sup>30</sup>

With improved bilateral ties since the 1990s, the number of Indians migrating to the Gulf witnessed a sharp increase reaching 3.2 million in 2000, 6.5 million in 2010, and as of 2020, an estimated 8.5 million Indians resided in the region (Figure 7.3). Simultaneously, remittances received in India from the expatriate community in the Gulf grew exponentially contributing nearly two percent of India's GDP and over 50% of the US\$83 billion in remittances received by India in 2019.<sup>31</sup> In recent years, the nationalization and localization policies in the Gulf and abundance of labor coming from other countries, such as Bangladesh, Philippines, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, have impacted the pattern of Indian labor migration to the region. However, the ability of Indian migrants to adapt to the demand and the growing number of professional migrants have kept the number of Indians in the GCC countries high. In 2020, both outflow of migrants and inflow of remittances were seriously disrupted due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but are likely to return to pre-pandemic level gradually.



*Figure 7.3* Population of overseas Indians in the GCC states, 2020. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

### ***Security Cooperation***

India began developing security cooperation with Persian Gulf countries in the early 2000s to neutralize any efforts from elements based in the region to harm Indian security. Extradition treaties were signed with the UAE in 1999, with Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman in 2004, with Iran in 2008, and finally with Saudi Arabia in 2010.<sup>32</sup> The process of developing cooperation in the security field was gradual, primarily because of concerns regarding Pakistan's close security relations with Gulf monarchies. The 26/11 (November 26, 2008) terrorist attacks in Mumbai changed the Indian attitude and New Delhi accelerated efforts to develop security ties with the region.<sup>33</sup> India's quest to prevent similar attacks that leveraged on the Gulf countries as a refuge by Indian fugitives and Pakistani terrorists necessitated greater cooperation through intelligence sharing and maritime security. Moreover, India and the Gulf states had mutuality of interests in developing maritime security cooperation to manage the threats to the Sea Lines of Communication (SLoC) in the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean from Somali piracy.

Security concerns related to Arab Uprisings in 2011–2012 and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its efforts to lure Indian Muslim youths led Indian security agencies to further enhance cooperation with their counterparts in the Persian Gulf.<sup>34</sup> Though India shares some security interests with Iran and the two sides cooperate through intelligence sharing and counter-terror as well as in the maritime domain, in recent years, it is India's security and defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Oman that has flourished, and they have emerged as India's major regional security partners.<sup>35</sup>

With Oman, the focus is on maritime security cooperation that began soon after the two countries started developing bilateral ties in the early 1990s. Fighting sea piracy has been a major concern in the bilateral security cooperation agenda.<sup>36</sup> In 2005, India and Oman signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation and this was renewed in 2016 during the visit of Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar to Muscat.<sup>37</sup> In 2018, during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India and Oman signed an annex to the MoU allowing Indian warships to use additional facilities at the Duqm Port.<sup>38</sup>

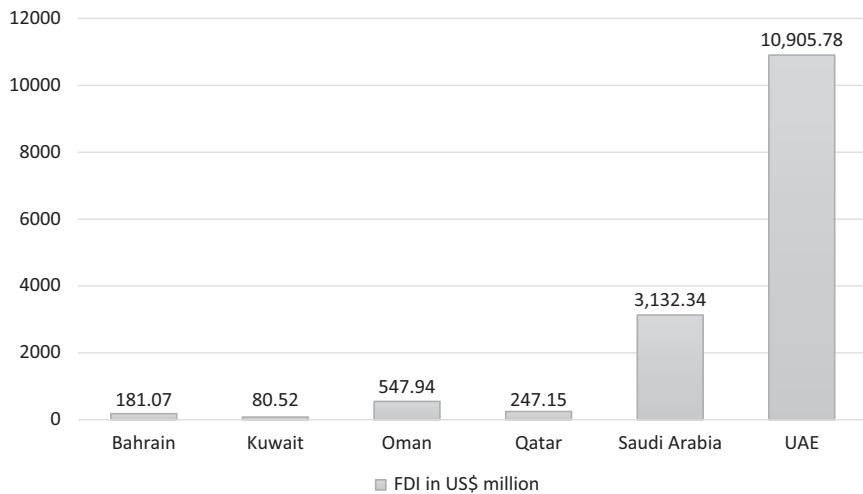
With the UAE and Saudi Arabia, it is the shared threat perception vis-à-vis international terrorism that led to greater security cooperation. The *Riyadh Declaration* underlined the intentions of India and Saudi Arabia on working together to fight the menace of terrorism. In February 2014, Crown Prince and Defense Minister (now King) Salman visited New Delhi and the two sides signed an MoU on defense cooperation. During bilateral exchanges and high-level visits ever since, security and defense cooperation has featured prominently. Mutual efforts are underway to further expand the defense and security ties including opening Indian military schools for the training of Saudi cadets and officers and regular joint exercises between armed forces of the two countries.<sup>39</sup>

India–UAE ties have witnessed a significant upward trajectory since 2015 including efforts at better security and defense cooperation. The emergence of the UAE as a beacon of ‘moderate Islam’ and lynchpin against radical/extremist ideologies has contributed to developing a shared threat perception against extremism and terrorism. Besides, there are mutual interests in maritime security and prevention of organized crime, leading the two toward greater security and defense cooperation. Engagements between their armed forces through joint military exercises and high-level meetings for possible cooperation in space exploration, artificial intelligence, and defense manufacturing have added strategic dynamics to bilateral relations.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Investments***

The Indian economy has grown exponentially in the three decades since India adopted economic liberalization policies in 1991. The country is a member of the G-20 and the sixth-largest global economy in terms of its current GDP.<sup>41</sup> India is also among the fastest large growing economies in the world with annual per capita growth breaching the seven percent mark in 2010 and 2016. To further boost growth and realize its economic potential, the governments in India have prioritized bringing FDI and have initiated structural reforms to improve the domestic business environment. Nevertheless, there remains concerns about widespread poverty and the low GDP per capita.<sup>42</sup>

The Gulf Arab countries, with their large sovereign wealth funds, are considered among the most attractive sources for FDI in India. Therefore, since 2015, India has proactively engaged with the region at the political and diplomatic levels with an emphasis on attracting Gulf investors, especially from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. India certainly offers an attractive investment destination but concerns regarding the domestic business environment, bureaucratic hurdles, and legal



*Figure 7.4* FDI from GCC countries to India, January 2016–December 2020 (US\$ million). Source: Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

troubles remain. Nonetheless, the GCC countries are among the major sources of FDI into India with the UAE (ranked ninth overall) and Saudi Arabia (ranked 17th overall) among the largest sources from the Gulf. Between April 2000 and December 2020, in terms of the cumulative FDI inflow to India, the six GCC countries collectively contributed US\$15.09 billion.<sup>43</sup> Though this was less than other sources of inward FDI (Mauritius, Singapore, United States, Netherlands, Japan, and United Kingdom in order of ranking), a notable growth in the value of FDI from the GCC countries has been visible since 2016 (see Figure 7.4). The most prominent countries in this regard are the UAE and Saudi Arabia which India has been trying to attract as leading foreign investors in the Indian market.<sup>44</sup>

Indian companies are also becoming more active in the Gulf market. Several Indian businesses in the UAE have made a name for themselves in the retail (Lulu Group), real estate and construction (Larsen & Turbo, Shapoorji Pallonji, etc.), telecommunications and IT (TCS, Wipro etc.), hospitality (Oberoi Group), and other sectors. With the region's countries trying to diversify their economies and reduce economic dependence on the oil sector, Indian companies are keen to invest in these markets which are expected to further enhance economic linkages and ties between India and the Gulf.

### ***How India Perceives the Persian Gulf***

India considers the Gulf region as its “extended neighborhood”<sup>45</sup> and maintains friendly ties with all the regional countries. In the 21st century, its relations with the major Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Qatar, and Oman—have

witnessed exponential growth. Strategic partnerships have also been developed with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. In the definition of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India's Gulf policy has evolved from 'Look West' to 'Think West' and 'Act West,'<sup>46</sup> meaning a gradual shift from transactional business ties to greater political engagements. From a conceptual point of view, in the post-Cold War era, India gradually recalibrated its foreign policy away from nonalignment toward multialignment,<sup>47</sup> and this slowly began to reflect in India's Gulf policy.

In practice, these entailed improved bilateral trade, business, and economic relations as well as security cooperation with all countries in the region. For example, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran (until US sanctions in 2018–19), and the UAE were among the top oil suppliers for India. In terms of trade, the UAE and Saudi Arabia ranked third and fourth overall, respectively, in 2019–2020. As noted above, the two are also the top sources for FDI from the Gulf to India. However, with regard to security cooperation, India engaged with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman as well as Iran and has been investing in the Chabahar Port in Iran for developing connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Further, India avoided taking sides in regional conflicts and tensions as was visible during the Qatar crisis (2017–2021) and the rivalries between Arab Gulf and Iran. In other words, nurturing bilateral relations with all regional countries, equidistance from regional blocs and rivalries, and stoic silence on contentious regional issues have been the hallmark of India's Gulf policy.<sup>48</sup>

The objective has been to improve political understanding, maximize economic potential, ensure the continuous flow of energy, and the safety of the large Indian community. Other goals include fighting sea piracy, preventing organized crimes, and countering terrorist activities, recruitment, and funding. There is also the mutuality of interests in the western Indian Ocean with the UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia leading to greater maritime security cooperation both at the bilateral level and through multilateral forums such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment that India joined as observer in September 2020. India also wishes to leverage its ties with the Gulf Arab countries to put pressure on Pakistan, especially concerning cross-border terrorism and the Kashmir issue,<sup>49</sup> as can be witnessed through the joint statements issued during high-level bilateral visits between India and UAE, and India and Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup> That it has worked to Indian advantage can be assuaged from the fact that the Gulf countries have been forthcoming in their condemnation of terrorist attacks on India's security establishment in Kashmir launched by Pakistan-based groups such as the Uri attack (September 2016) and Pulwama attack (February 2019). On the other hand, with Iran, India had shared interests in stabilizing Afghanistan and for better connectivity to Central Asia.<sup>51</sup>

Largely, New Delhi has been able to pursue these objectives in the region without getting entangled in the intra-regional disputes and rivalries and has succeeded in minimizing their impacts, if any, on its policy through bilateral engagements and minimal involvement in regional matters. However, in a situation of growing regional discord and fast-changing geopolitics, improving ties with the

US and competition/rivalry with China, and above all, ambitions of an emerging global power, India's multialignment policy in the Gulf will face greater regional and international scrutiny.

Among the most important regional security issues that at present impact India's Persian Gulf policy, and that are expected to continue to do so in foreseeable future are Gulf security, threats of terrorism, Iran's military ambitions, regional geopolitics including Arab Gulf–Iran rivalry, and problems among members of the GCC. The posturing by regional actors, most importantly Israel and Turkey, will also have an impact on New Delhi's choices. But besides the regional issues, India's policy will depend on the systemic calculations vis-à-vis the evolving global geopolitics between the US and China, and the positions taken by Russia and western European countries, especially the UK, France, and Germany.

## **Persian Gulf Security and India**

India considers Gulf security and stability a matter of national interest for a variety of reasons but the most important are the trade and investment potential of the Gulf monarchies, the presence of large Indian migrants in the region, and its vitality in India's energy security. The latter two are not mere foreign policy issues in New Delhi but are serious domestic concerns with larger political and economic implications. In several Indian provinces that send a majority of the Indian migrants to the Gulf – such as Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar – the issue of safety and security of migrants resonates in local politics, which in turn can impact national politics.

Hence, in a situation of conflict or emergency facing Indian nationals, New Delhi has found ways to act swiftly and undertake rescue or repatriation missions with help from local authorities. For example, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990, India evacuated nearly 150,000 of its nationals from Kuwait with the help of Iraqi and Jordanian authorities.<sup>52</sup> More recently, in the wake of the eruption of violence and civil wars after Arab Uprisings, India evacuated its nationals as well as some foreign citizens stuck in the conflict zones in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen in cooperation with local authorities.<sup>53</sup> Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, between May and September 2020, India repatriated more than 900,000 Indian workers from the GCC countries.<sup>54</sup>

However, these instances were either a limited security challenge confined to a specific location or country, or were peacetime efforts. In the event of a wider regional destabilization, the implications for Indian migrants will be far bigger.<sup>55</sup> Not only will it necessitate rescue or repatriation of over nine million people, but it will also have far-reaching economic consequences in terms of finding ways to rehabilitate the returnees as well as the sudden loss of inward remittances, not to mention the adverse impact on the businesses owned by Indian companies and individuals. This means that India will prefer maintaining the regional balance of power and would prefer a regional security architecture. At the same time, it will not jeopardize the safety of its nationals residing in the region by taking sides in regional disputes.

Another pressing concern is energy security. As noted earlier, India is an energy-deficient country; its hydrocarbon reserves and production are much lower than its consumption. For example, in 2019, India's oil consumption stood at 5.2 million barrels per day (BPD) but its crude oil production was a meager 826,000 BPD,<sup>56</sup> which means India was able to meet only 15% of its oil consumption through domestic production. Over the years, India's external dependence to meet the gap in crude oil consumption-to-production has hovered above 80% and it has met nearly 55–60% of this through imports from the Gulf including Iraq which has emerged as a major oil supplier to India since 2011.

To balance this against threats of regional instability, India is gradually diversifying its energy sources to cleaner fossil fuels such as natural gas and to renewable energy sources like hydropower, wind, and solar energy.<sup>57</sup> For example, Masdar, a renewable energy company from Abu Dhabi, has recently invested in India's H-Future Energies. This not only helps India achieve the goal of diversification of hydrocarbon imports but also falls within its broader commitment of reducing carbon emissions. Besides, India is also diversifying the sources for hydrocarbon imports including from emerging oil and gas producers. As a result, in the five years since 2015, countries such as Australia, Nigeria, and the US have emerged as major sources of hydrocarbon imports to India, in addition to the Gulf countries (Table 7.2).

Bilateral trade and investments and their impact on India's economic growth are another important concern. Despite the far-reaching implications of these concerns, India is unlikely to commit any significant military resources for contingencies in the region. India does not deploy military resources externally, except in the case of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces, and there is no indication of it changing anytime in near future.<sup>58</sup> The one exception to this has been the decision to extend military support to Sri Lanka against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the mid-1980s which eventually led to the LTTE orchestrating the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. This bitter experience has led to strengthening of the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs of sovereign nations. This has, however, not prevented India from deploying its armed forces in rescue and repatriation missions abroad such as during the Kuwait crisis and in the wake of Arab Spring. Moreover, India has since June 2019 deployed naval ships to safeguard Indian-flagged cargo ships passing

*Table 7.2 Top Five Sources of India's Hydrocarbon Imports, 2015–2020*

Rank	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020
1	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	Iraq
2	Iraq	Iraq	Iraq	Iraq	Saudi Arabia
3	Nigeria	UAE	Australia	UAE	UAE
4	Qatar	Iran	Nigeria	Iran	Nigeria
5	UAE	Nigeria	Iran	Nigeria	US

Source: Directorate General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

through the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf.<sup>59</sup> But thus far, India has shied away from building military outposts or committing significant military resources outside its borders, not as a mere principle, but also because of resource constraints. It would therefore prefer a multilateral approach to ensuring regional security in case of a change in the regional order.

In terms of the need for regional security, India will wish to avoid a situation wherein a larger conflict engulfs the Persian Gulf, and has expressed these sentiments through official statements on various occasions and forums. For example, following the killing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) chief General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a statement calling for “restraint” and avoiding any action that can “escalate” the situation.<sup>60</sup> India prefers a status quo wherein the US in partnership with the regional countries ensures regional security, but if this becomes untenable, under present circumstances, India is likely to favor an international action plan under UN’s tutelage or a regional understanding without any need for serious military commitments of its own.<sup>61</sup>

At present, four major regional security concerns inform Indian policy choices, namely geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Gulf Arab monarchies, Iran’s regional and military ambitions, intra-GCC discords, and threats from terrorism and extremism.

### ***Tensions between Iran and the Gulf Monarchies***

Tensions between the Gulf monarchies and Iran are a cause of concern for India. After the 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings, the tensions between Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain, on the other, have caused occasional flare-ups raising concerns of a wider regional conflict. The direct and indirect military interventions of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have contributed to not only the devastation of the latter three countries but also have occasionally compromised the internal security of the Gulf monarchies and Iran. The devastated countries provided safe havens for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS to flourish and multiply threatening regional and global security. Although India has not faced any ISIS-inspired attack inside its territory, it witnessed several cases of Indian youths trying to join ISIS.<sup>62</sup> There were also attempts by the group to establish a *wilayat-e-hind* (India province) or *wilayat-e-Kashmir* (Kashmir Province) alarming Indian security agencies.

Further, regional tensions have posed threats to the shipping lines in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Gulf of Aden convincing India of the emerging explosive regional scenario. Apart from threatening India’s interest in the Persian Gulf, the regional tensions are seen in New Delhi as threatening India’s national security. India, therefore, wishes for the regional tensions to be resolved amicably through dialogue and negotiations. It does not take sides and wishes to maintain friendly ties with both Iran and Gulf monarchies. Despite growing bilateral relations and implications for interests, New Delhi has not shown any inclination toward greater involvement in regional affairs to try and deescalate the tensions.

India continues to prefer bilateral engagements with Persian Gulf countries and adheres to the idea of multialignment without jeopardizing its interests with one side or the other. Nonetheless, with the changing regional and international geopolitical scenario and India's growing proximity with the Gulf monarchies and the US, the bilateral ties with Iran have been adversely affected but New Delhi has not yet shown any substantive sign of a change in its Persian Gulf policy.

### ***Iran's Military Ambitions***

Secondly, the issue of international and regional concerns over Iran's military build-up and regional expansionism are critical for Indian policy. Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile programs have caused many regional and international anxieties. Concerns over Iran's nuclear program have lingered for long, and international negotiations and sanctions under the UN umbrella or unilateral actions by the US have failed to resolve the issue. Iran asserts its rights to develop a civilian nuclear program, and argues that it abides by its commitment of signing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). However, this has not helped in diminishing regional anxieties over Tehran's intentions; Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE suspect Iran of continuing to pursue nuclear weapons. Under international pressure and threat of sanctions, Iran has agreed to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear plants. This had eventually led to the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal as a roadmap for resolution of the issue, but regional anxieties over Iranian intentions have lingered.<sup>63</sup>

Iran's Arab neighbors and Israel did not consider the JCPOA as a positive development and were critical of the Obama administration signing the deal alleging that it will allow Iran the time to eventually develop nuclear weapons capacity.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, they fear that Iran is developing ballistic missile capacity<sup>65</sup> and expanding its military footprints in the region by inspiring, supporting, and arming militant non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, the Houthi movement in Yemen, sectarian militias in Syria, and Islamist militants in Palestine.<sup>66</sup> A nuclear Iran, armed with ballistic missile capacity and vast networks of allied militias in the region is considered the foremost security threat by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE and their regional allies.

India's position on the Iranian nuclear issue is that being a signatory to the NPT, Iran should shun any attempt to develop nuclear weapons. India, being a *de facto* nuclear weapon state, is opposed to nuclear proliferation.<sup>67</sup> However, domestic debates in India largely do not see Iran's nuclear program with suspicion, and argue that Iran should be allowed to use nuclear energy for power-generation and medicinal purposes under IAEA monitoring through a UN-led process.<sup>68</sup> But at the UN, India has on several occasions voted in favor of the international sanctions on Iran to curb its nuclear program and comply with the UN-led process to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>69</sup> In Tehran, this was seen as India coming under US pressure to vote against Iran, but India managed to salvage the situation by engaging Iran at the political and diplomatic levels as well as continuing trade, business, and investment activities, including

importing Iranian oil, participating in oil exploration activities, and committing to invest in the Chabahar Port that India considers crucial for connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>70</sup>

However, after the US withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018, followed by Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy, India's bilateral relations with Iran were again affected due to New Delhi abiding by the US sanctions on imports of Iranian oil. There were a variety of reasons for India to stop oil imports from Iran, primarily fear of US secondary sanctions, but the existence of abundant alternative options for India for oil imports is another explanation. India not buying even a small quantity of oil as a symbolic gesture and not exploring alternative payment options, akin to the Rupee payment mechanism used during 2012–2015, was seen as an unfriendly gesture in Tehran.<sup>71</sup>

India salvaged the issue by underlining its continued commitment to partner Iran in the development of the Chabahar Port but only after a clarification from Washington that the port development project is out of the purview of US sanctions. Besides, India has been engaging Iran for the future of Afghanistan in anticipation of the US withdrawal. India shares Iranian skepticism of the Taliban and would prefer the Afghan government to remain in control of the country. Moreover, New Delhi is concerned about the growing proximity between Beijing and Tehran in the light of the 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement signed between the two in March 2021.<sup>72</sup> The Indian inclination to continue engaging Iran in these contexts became clear when Defense Minister Rajnath Singh visited Tehran in September 2020 followed by a stopover a few weeks later by Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. This was reciprocated by Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami in February 2021 who visited India to attend the first Indian Ocean Region (IOR) Defence Ministers' Conclave held on the sidelines of AeroIndia 2021 in Bengaluru.

Nonetheless, from the Indian point of view, the cost of a symbolic gesture with Iran was considered bigger than the cost it would have incurred in terms of hampering relations with Iran's adversaries. India did not want to jeopardize its growing defense and security partnership with the US, and friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Israel over continuing to import oil from Iran. Further, domestic debates in India have begun to appreciate the regional fears that Iran's military and nuclear expansionism can affect the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, and that will not only have wider regional security implications but also seriously hamper India's interests in the region.

### ***Intra-GCC Problems***

Thirdly, the intra-GCC problem made India rethink some of its previous assumptions. For the most part, before the 2017 Arab quartet's (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain) boycott of Qatar, India saw the GCC as a bloc. Despite dealing with the regional countries bilaterally, the discussions and debates in New Delhi considered the six members of the GCC as being united in their views on regional and international matters. As the GCC crisis unraveled and the extent of

the complaint among the quartet against Doha came to be recognized, New Delhi was forced to take a fresh look at the grouping and its members.

India's measured response to the boycott announcement underlined that India was not ready to take sides in the conflict. The statement emphasized the need for "constructive dialogue and peaceful negotiations" of the differences.<sup>73</sup> It further emphasized the significance of regional security and raised concerns regarding terrorism and Indian migrants in the Gulf to underline its preference for a negotiated resolution. As the situation began to stabilize, domestic debates in India suggested the need for India to become more proactively involved in trying to resolve the issue either through bilateral or multilateral mediation.

However, India preferred to abide by its stand of non-involvement in regional affairs and emphasized mutual dialogue and intra-GCC efforts. After the GCC crisis eventually came to an end with the *Al-Ula Declaration* on January 5, 2021, India welcomed the move.<sup>74</sup> It appreciated the role of Kuwait and Oman in trying to resolve the problems between Qatar and Saudi Arabia–UAE–Bahrain. New Delhi also recognizes that the end of the crisis might not have brought an end to all differences. Hence, the Indian approach is likely to be more cautious when it comes to dealing with the GCC as a bloc and the preference for bilateral engagement will take precedence as has been seen before and during the crisis wherein Indian prioritized the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman in terms of trade, investments, and security cooperation.

### ***Concerns Regarding Terrorism and Extremism***

As noted earlier in this chapter, India has developed a robust security and defense partnership with Persian Gulf countries. One of the driving factors for this has been the shared threat perception against terrorism and extremism as well as the growing mutuality of view on political Islam. India has had a bitter experience of political Islam since the time of its freedom struggle when the idea of Pakistan germinated partly due to the influence of political Islam on Muslim leaders of the Indian national movement such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan. This eventually led to the partition of the subcontinent and the formation of Pakistan at the time of Indian independence in 1947. The threat of political Islam within the GCC countries has been amplified in the wake of the Arab Spring. Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman have become increasingly concerned about the spread of political Islam in the region with the UAE and Saudi Arabia emerging as major regional powers working to contain the rising tide of Islamism. The shared worldview of political Islam has contributed to the growing synergy between India, UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Counter-terrorism cooperation with the Gulf Arab monarchies began to develop in the wake of the 26/11 incident in Mumbai in 2008 and it accelerated after the rise of ISIS since 2012. India used its own experience of fighting terror and the relatively fewer Indians joining the international terrorist organization to leverage better cooperation in countering terror and combating extremism. The continued regional security threat from terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and

al-Qaeda, a growing movement in the Arab Gulf monarchies toward religious moderation, and the Indian experience of fighting terror informed India's Gulf policy, and is likely to further catalyze strengthening of defense and security ties between India and the Gulf monarchies.

## **Middle East Geopolitics and India**

The geopolitical trends in the Middle East are an important factor affecting or that can potentially affect India's choices in the Gulf. The consolidation of a regional stand against Iran was reflected with the signing of Abraham Accords in September 2020,<sup>75</sup> and Iran's continued defiance of US regional influence are notable. The first brings Iran's regional foes Israel and Gulf monarchies while the second raised the possibility of an outbreak of war in 2019 and 2020, especially after the killing of General Soleimani. For India, rivalry in the Persian Gulf is a potential national security threat, but New Delhi expects it to remain confined to the region and hopes for the situation to remain within manageable limits. A more potent challenge is the tensions between Iran and Israel, not least because it can ignite the entire region, but because India does not want to be dragged into the geopolitical tensions and become a theater for even a symbolic fight between Iran and Israel.<sup>76</sup>

There are other actors, including Turkey, Russia, and European countries, which can impact the geopolitical trends in the region. Though they seem distant for India, both in terms of geography and limited maneuverability, they can still impact the outcomes of the geopolitical rivalries in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, India has been wary of their moves. Although it sees Russia and Europe as constructive players, it views Turkey as an unfriendly regional power because of Ankara's explicit support to Pakistan over the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. For example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan raised the Kashmir issue during the UN General Assembly session in September 2019, a month after New Delhi's decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution of India that granted partial autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Hence, Turkish actions are closely watched in New Delhi, and though the likelihood of Ankara emerging as a significant actor in the Persian Gulf is unlikely in the immediate future, India will be circumspect of any Turkish role.

## **The Systemic Factors in India's Gulf Policy**

Besides the regional security threats, there are extra-regional factors and systemic calculations that impact, and have implications for, Indian policy choices in the Persian Gulf.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Relations with the US***

Firstly, India's growing relations with the US<sup>78</sup> has implications for India's external postures and foreign policy choices. There is a greater consensus within India for better relations with the US to broaden the industrial base of its economy

through both government-to-government and business-to-business partnerships. Further, India wants to strengthen its defense and security partnership with the US to be able to achieve its goal of fast military modernization.<sup>79</sup> Besides bilateral cooperation, India sees the US as an important global partner to balance China's expanding influence in Asia and China's perceived encroachment on India's traditional areas of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Under the Trump administration, there was a decisive shift in US policy toward China and this led to a greater focus on Indo-Pacific to contain a rising and assertive China.<sup>80</sup> The US has been committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific as well as contain China's aggressive economic and foreign policies.<sup>81</sup> This shift was not suggestive of declining interest in the Middle East, as some would like to argue.<sup>82</sup> The shared concern vis-à-vis China means that there is a growing Indo-US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, both at bilateral and multilateral levels. This is one of the driving forces in the way the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between India, the US, Australia, and Japan evolved under President Trump.<sup>83</sup> Even though this did not have any direct links with India's Persian Gulf approach, the greater synergies between India and the US can impact India's choices in the Gulf as well.

The most likely impact could be on the Indian approach toward Iran. India and the US have a divergent understanding of Iran. Even before Trump, the US factor has impacted India's relations with Iran.<sup>84</sup> Trump's maximum pressure policy complicated India's choices and generated bitterness in Indo-Iran ties. The Indian response to the US withdrawal from JCPOA underlined that India's Gulf policy has begun to take the regional concerns over Iran's nuclear program and regional ambitions more seriously. Though Iran is not a pariah for India and there are common interests between New Delhi and Tehran in Afghanistan and Chabahar Port, India's decision to comply with US sanctions on imports of Iranian oil underlines its preference of the US over Iran.<sup>85</sup>

With the change in the administration, there are possibilities of some moderation in the US view of Iran, but Iran nonetheless will remain the cornerstone of President Joseph R. Biden's Middle East policy. From the Indian viewpoint, it would prefer a less hawkish US administration on Iran that will make the bilateral relations with Iran less complicated. But if the divergences arise, the Indian position is likely to prioritize the US. Both ways, the US factor will continue to challenge India's multialignment policy in the Persian Gulf.

### ***The China Factor***

Secondly, Indian choices in the Gulf can be affected by the way India-China relations evolve, and to a lesser extent the competition with China in the Persian Gulf.<sup>86</sup> India-China relations have witnessed a fast deterioration in recent years. Domestic concerns in India over Chinese encroachment on India's traditional areas of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, deepening Sino-Pakistan relations and the inability of India to compete with China in Southeast Asia and elsewhere has fueled serious reevaluation of bilateral relations with China. Incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan skirmishes in 2020

have hardened the Indian domestic opinion in favor of enhancing cooperation with global powers to contain China's assertive foreign policy and rising influence.<sup>87</sup> But the likely theater of the Sino-Indian tensions, besides India's northern borders and possibly South Asia, will be the Indo-Pacific.<sup>88</sup>

There are remote chances of this spreading to the Persian Gulf under present circumstances. Compared to the deterioration in bilateral ties, the competition in the Persian Gulf with China is less likely to impact Indian policy choices in the Gulf, but concerns in India over China's growing footprints in the Persian Gulf are palpable. India sees this more as a challenge than an opportunity for cooperation, despite some suggestions otherwise,<sup>89</sup> especially as India worries over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There are some concerns regarding the realization of the China–Iran strategic partnership, but this is unlikely to make New Delhi rethink its approach toward the Persian Gulf. Nonetheless, the China factor can apprehend India's possibility of aligning its position on Iran with the US. This would mean a continuity of the multialignment approach.

### ***Global Politics***

Finally, the emerging global dynamics can significantly impact the policy choices for India. The global order is going through a phase of redefinition. China's rise and assertive foreign policy have animated established and emerging global powers. There is a degree of consensus emerging between the US, Europe, India, Japan, and Australia of the need to contain China. Though Russia and many regional powers, both in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East do not yet see China as a threat, there are concerns regarding China's use of 'debt-trap diplomacy' though this has not been a concern in the GCC countries.<sup>90</sup> The perception of China using economic diplomacy to challenge the international order is widely popular.

The divided opinion on China is yet to make any significant impact in the Persian Gulf. China's partnerships with the region have grown in leaps. It is the foremost economic partner of regional countries where economic partnerships are being institutionalized within the BRI framework. Beijing is undertaking mega developmental projects of building transportation corridors, constructing ports, and developing new cities.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, China is developing security cooperation with regional countries and is taking more interest in the regional politics, making its engagement strategic.<sup>92</sup>

This is likely to impact the way the US–China rivalry takes shape, and this, in turn, will shape the regional security situation. India, being a major Asian power with global aspiration, can become a pole in the US–China rivalry, especially given the way New Delhi has moved closer to the US in recent years. The Persian Gulf, with its vitality in international affairs and with its myriad problems and complications, will pose a serious challenge for Indian foreign policy. Though it is unlikely to become a theater of the US–China–India triangle at present, the regional situation and interests for India will significantly inform Indian foreign policy choices. This will also, in turn, determine the future of India's multialignment policy in the Persian Gulf.

## Conclusion

Beginning in the 1990s, India's Gulf policy gradually moved away from its Cold War mold of nonalignment to multialignment. This has proven fruitful in terms of India's growing trade and economic ties with the region. Business ties have gradually paved the way for better political and security ties with multiple regional countries. The multialignment policy and ability to balance relations among regional rivals have resulted in India securing its vital interests in the region. But this has made India prone to adverse impacts of regional security risks. Indian policymakers are, therefore, increasingly taking the evolving regional and international situation, and how it might affect India's strategic interests, in devising policy toward the Persian Gulf.

The biggest concern for India is an outbreak of a regional war that will not only force India to choose sides but also push India's advances in the region decades back. At the same time, India is wary of taking any proactive role in managing the security situation in the Gulf. It will prefer the status quo with continued space for maneuvering of its multialignment policy. But the regional and international situation vis-à-vis Iran continues to complicate India's choices. An evolving foreign policy outlook, especially in terms of bilateral relations with the US and China, and a fast-changing regional security environment, primarily concerning Iran, can force a relook at its multialignment policy in the Persian Gulf when the time arises.

## Notes

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  - 11 See, for example, Jon Alterman, “Conclusion,” in *Gulf Kaleidoscope: Reflections on the Iranian Challenge*, ed. Jon Alterman (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), 100–5; and F. Gregory Gause III, “Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 61, no. 5 (2019): 7–24.
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  - 42 In 2019, according to the World Bank, it was US\$2,099, while the global average was recorded at US\$18,381, but India was placed at the bottom among the G20 countries.
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## **8 Pakistan's Political and Security Engagement with the Gulf Countries**

*Umer Karim*

The international relations environment of Pakistan has several regions that are of strategic significance. As Pakistan sits at the cross-roads of Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, its neighborhood is uniquely diverse and the nature of engagement with each actor in this broader strategic space has political and economic implications for the country.<sup>1</sup> India and Afghanistan remain prominent in the political discourse due to their linkages with Pakistan's national security. China has emerged as a critical player vis-à-vis Pakistan's economy due to progress on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In contrast, Pakistan's maritime neighborhood has received relatively less attention even though only the waters of the Arabian Sea separate the Arabian Peninsula from Pakistan's Makran coast. With the independence of Pakistan from India in 1947, a new Muslim polity emerged on the map of the world and the founding fathers wanted to develop cordial relations with Muslim rulers in the Arabian Peninsula. Religion, therefore, was an obvious connecting point between Pakistan and the ruling houses of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states but the contemporary relationship is much more politically rooted. Gulf states are particularly important for Pakistan due to their financial strength as millions of Pakistani expatriates work there and send back remittances to Pakistan. These remittances constitute the backbone of Pakistan's economy given that its industrial sector is underdeveloped and export revenues are limited to the textile sector. A comprehensive picture of the recent nature of Pakistan and Gulf ties can be charted by focusing on their political and strategic linkages but also giving weight to the economic dependence of Pakistan upon its Gulf partners.

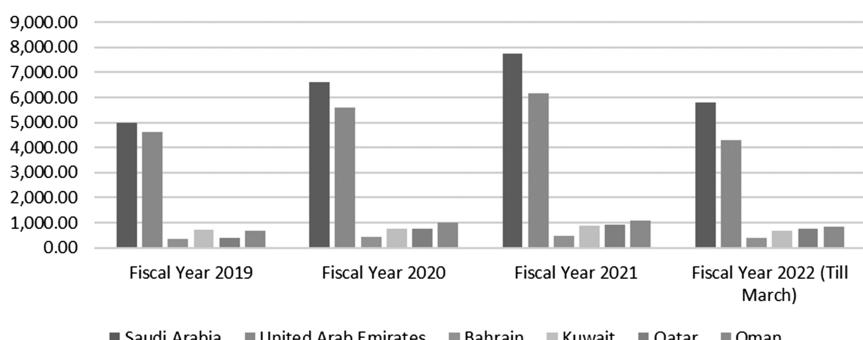
This chapter opens with an overview of Pakistan's relationship with each of the GCC states and then highlights how Iran and India impact upon Pakistan's relationship with Gulf nations. This is followed by a discussion of two key regional conflicts – the crisis in Yemen and the intra-Gulf dispute – to highlight Pakistan's role in Gulf security. It then offers an analysis of how Pakistan's evolving relationships with China and the United States (US) impact on its ties with Gulf states. The key insight in this chapter is that Pakistan has gradually shifted from a Gulf-aligned foreign policy to a more balanced approach.

## Pakistan's Relationship with the Gulf States

### Saudi Arabia

As Pakistan came into existence as a new political entity within South Asia and put forward its claim as the political representative of South Asian Muslims, it aspired to develop stronger ties with Saudi Arabia, the land of the two Holy Mosques. There were reciprocal visits from leadership of both countries in the 1950s and 1960s. This bilateral engagement only acquired a strategic aspect after the Arab-Israel war of 1967 when a security pact was concluded in August during the visit of the former Saudi crown prince and then Saudi minister of defense, Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz to Pakistan. The pact was partly the result of close personal ties between Pakistani President Ayub Khan and Saudi King Faisal as well as the professionalism of Pakistani Air Force pilots who shot down three Israeli air force jets while flying Royal Jordan Air Force planes.<sup>2</sup> This defense agreement officiated the role of Pakistan's military trainers in Saudi Arabia and resulted in the sending of nearly 100 Pakistani military and air force officers to Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> In 1969, this military cooperation was put to test when Pakistani pilots flying Saudi jets repelled a military column of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen that had attacked the Saudi southern border post of Wadi'a.<sup>4</sup>

During the Yom Kippur war against Israel in 1973, Pakistan fully supported the Arab bloc and the successive Saudi-led oil embargo campaign. This led to the development of a strong personal bond between King Faisal and Prime Minister (PM) Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and was clearly manifested during the Islamic Summit of 1974 in Lahore.<sup>5</sup> In the past, both sides had enjoyed good ties, but this was the first sign of an interpersonal relationship that rose above geopolitical interests. Under Bhutto, for the first time Pakistani laborers started arriving in Saudi Arabia and a steady stream of foreign remittances<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 8.1) began to flow into Pakistani economy.<sup>7</sup> This enacted a structural linkage between the two economies whereby the petro-dollar wealth of Saudi Arabia was not limited to its own borders and started flowing into Pakistan.



*Figure 8.1* Foreign remittances to Pakistan from Gulf states (in US\$ millions).

The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to the collapse of the US Twin Pillar policy against the Soviet Union in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan emerged as key strategic partners for the US in the broader Middle East and South Asia. This dynamic further strengthened the strategic alignment of the two countries, a unique bilateral relationship which Prince Turki Al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi General Intelligence Directorate, described as “probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without any official treaty.”<sup>9</sup> This was also the start of a security related dependency that would provide Pakistan a significant leverage vis-à-vis Saudi Kingdom and also enhanced the involvement of Pakistan’s military in bilateral affairs. The security understanding among the two sides was further regularized by the 1982 Protocol Agreement regarding Deputation of Pakistani Armed Personnel and Military Training,<sup>10</sup> which paved the way for the deployment of nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops in the Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> The Afghan war proved to be a key arena of strategic cooperation and military intelligence sharing and deputations of Pakistan’s military personnel created a strong bond between the Pakistani security institutions and Saudi royal family. With the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the threat environment for the Gulf changed and Pakistan’s strategic relevance for Saudi Arabia was considerably reduced.<sup>12</sup> However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has once again increased Pakistan’s importance to Saudi Arabia.

In 1991, Pakistan refrained from joining the military coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi forces and only deployed troops within Saudi Arabia with a mandate to protect Saudi territory. However, the mutual interests in Afghanistan and a general aligned strategic outlook kept the two sides connected, and Saudi Arabia along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recognized the Pakistan-supported Taliban government in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The strength of bilateral ties was again conspicuous when the Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdelaziz al-Saud was taken on a tour of Pakistani nuclear installations in 1999. He became the first and one of the few foreigners to visit these sensitive facilities.<sup>14</sup>

Pakistan’s nuclear program was another milestone in bilateral ties. Saudi Arabia was one of the few countries that fully supported Pakistan after it incurred international sanctions in 1998 owing to its nuclear tests. Pakistan’s nuclear program had in fact taken shape allegedly thanks to funding that indirectly came from the Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> The Kingdom also provided Pakistan with \$2 billion worth of oil in 1998–1999; it later changed this arrangement from a deferred payment to that of a grant to help stabilize the country’s economic situation.<sup>16</sup> This financial support further strengthened the Saudi economic leverage over Pakistan and was translated into the political arena in the aftermath of 1999 coup whereby Saudi King Abdullah was able to broker a deal between General Musharaf and the sacked PM Nawaz Sharif resulting in the latter’s exile to the Kingdom. Pakistani–Saudi ties went through a relative cold period during tenure of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government of 2008–2013, which the Saudis perceived as heavily tilted toward Iran and only recovered once a Sharif-led government replaced PPP in the

2013 elections.<sup>17</sup> With a generous loan package of \$1.5 billion offered in 2014, the Sharif government appeared to have full Saudi support.<sup>18</sup>

The bilateral relationship appeared to be on a positive trajectory but the change of guard in Saudi Arabia and the subsequent upheavals within the Gulf's security environment changed this. The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and the Gulf crisis of 2017 tested the bilateral relationship as Pakistan avoided taking sides. This resulted in an essentially cold phase in bilateral affairs, as described below, which only changed with the election of Imran Khan as prime minister in the elections of 2018. The new government had an amicable relationship with the country's military rank and file and wanted to turn a new page with its Gulf partners. Khan managed to reset ties with Saudi leadership and particularly the powerful Saudi crown prince and was awarded a \$6 billion financial support package as well.<sup>19</sup> The high point of this proximity between Khan and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman came when he visited Pakistan and pledged to invest \$21 billion in various projects including the construction of an oil refinery in the port city of Gwadar.<sup>20</sup>

However, the relationship encountered another test in the aftermath of India's move to annul the special status of its administered Kashmir State in 2019. Pakistan banked on the support of Islamic fraternity but the reaction from Saudi Arabia was a rather muted one.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Turkey whose relationship with Saudi Arabia had become increasingly contentious strongly supported Pakistan's position even when this came at the cost of Indo-Turkish relationship.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, alongside Malaysia, Turkey and Pakistan convened a new platform to discuss the problems of the Islamic world at the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019. Sensing this represented an attempt to undermine the authority of Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and Saudi leadership of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia pressured Pakistan to cancel its participation. Although Pakistan did succumb to Saudi pressure and backed out of the initiative, the mutual distrust remained and Pakistan's relationship with Turkey was further strengthened.<sup>23</sup> This ultimately led to the cancellation of Saudi Arabia's financial support package and Pakistan had to pay back Saudi loans.<sup>24</sup> As the competition for regional hegemony in the Middle East has scaled down in the wake of a Biden administration in the US that has signaled to re-evaluate its ties with partners in the Middle East, this had positively impacted upon the Saudi-Pakistani bilateral relationship. Leaders from both sides have started to re-engage and re-established the Supreme Coordination Council to speed up strategic cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The UAE***

Pakistan had maintained informal ties with the Trucial States<sup>26</sup> in the Arabian Gulf but owing to the presence of the British political mandate, there were no formal political relations with leaders of the Trucial States. As the British authorities withdrew from East of Suez in 1971, Pakistan became one of the first countries to formally recognize the newly formed political entity of the UAE. This political engagement between the two states had an impact in the economic and security

domains. With the petro-dollar revenue driving growth in the economies of the Gulf, Pakistani laborers made their way to these states and were employed in large numbers both in the private and government sectors (see Table 8.1). This arrival of Pakistanis on a mass scale created new cultural and political bonds between the two states and furthered the bilateral trust between the two sides. This subsequently resulted in greater involvement of Pakistan in the defense affairs of the Emirates.<sup>27</sup>

After independence, the UAE found itself in an unstable neighborhood and had to deal with the Iranian capture of three islands<sup>28</sup> from Ras-al-Khaimah and Sharjah.<sup>29</sup> This prompted the Emirates to seek defense aid from Pakistan, a country with a professional and battle-hardened army. Gradually, Pakistani military servicemen were either training Emirati security forces or serving in them. In this manner, Pakistan became intertwined with Emirati security. Pakistan Air Force personnel formed the bulk of the newly established air wing of Emirati armed forces as most Pakistani pilots were familiar with the planes in the inventory of the new force and it has been claimed that first five chiefs of the Emirati air force were all Pakistani Air Force officers.<sup>30</sup> However, the most critical reason for this Emirati–Pakistani defense cooperation and something that also remains true for Pakistan's defense ties with other Gulf states has been the unique political and religious character of the Pakistani state. It has been argued that Pakistan being a non-Arab, non-Persian but a Muslim state with a professional military force

*Table 8.1 Population of Pakistani Expatriates in Gulf States*

Country	Pakistani Expatriate Population
Saudi Arabia	2.7 million (2019) <sup>a</sup>
United Arab Emirates	1.6 million (2021) <sup>b</sup>
Bahrain	1,00,000 (2017) <sup>c</sup>
Kuwait	1,26,000 (2022) <sup>d</sup>
Qatar	1,50,000 (2020) <sup>e</sup>
Oman	206,083 (2022) <sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Sib Kaifee, “Over 2.7 Million Pakistanis Living in Saudi Arabia to Benefit from New Green Card,” *Arab News*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1496861/pakistan>.

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<sup>c</sup>Anish Mishra, “Pakistan-Bahrain Relations: Strengthening Ties with the Gulf,” *Institute of South Asian Studies*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ISAS-Insights-No.-401-Pakistan-Bahrain-Relations-Strengthening-Ties-with-the-Gulf.pdf>.

<sup>d</sup>“Kuwait Population,” World Population Review, continuously updated, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kuwait-population>.

<sup>e</sup>Saima Shabbir, “Pakistan Takes up Worker Payment Issues with Qatar,” *Arab News*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1689021/world>.

<sup>f</sup>“Expat Population in Oman Increases by Nearly 60,000 in Two Months,” *Times of Oman*, March 22, 2022, <https://timesofoman.com/article/114669-expat-population-in-oman-increases-by-nearly-60000-in-two-months-1>.

neatly fitted with the political requirements of the Gulf states with regard to their prospective security partners.<sup>31</sup> Yet, this stage of defense relationship has long passed and there are no credible reports of any Pakistanis working in the Emirati air force as of now.

This Pakistani policy to cultivate defense ties with Arab Gulf states complicated its political ties with the Iranian regime of Reza Shah Pehlavi. Pakistan and Iran were considered political allies but Pakistan's reluctance to back Iran as the ultimate hegemon within the Gulf region led to an Iranian détente with India. The UAE reciprocated this politically by lending support to Pakistan on the issue of Bangladesh and only established diplomatic ties with the new state once Pakistan itself had done so.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Pakistan's relationship with the Emirates flourished monumentally. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, the UAE politically backed the efforts of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to shore up Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion. As the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, the UAE alongside Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were the only countries to recognize the Taliban government and establish diplomatic ties with it.<sup>33</sup>

The personal relationship between successive Pakistani and Emirati leaders in particular Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahyan was also a significant driving force. Emirati royals were allotted dedicated hunting tracts in southern and western Pakistan where they descended to hunt the exotic houbara bustard. Two of the most well-entrenched political dynasties of Pakistan, the Sharifs and Bhuttos, also maintained close ties with Emirati royalty and have spent time in the UAE during their respective political exiles. This has also translated into huge Emirati investments within Pakistan, particularly in the real estate, telecom, banking, and information technology sectors, as well as financial support packages for various sectors within Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> In 2012 the UAE became the largest foreign investor in Pakistan, a spot that is now held by China thanks to the CPEC projects.<sup>35</sup> Although the Emirates may have been initially perturbed by the development of Gwadar, it appears that this concern may have passed since Gwadar still remains underdeveloped and far from challenging any Emirati port in terms of container traffic, transit trade, or industrial development.

By contrast, the political relationship suffered a significant setback after the departure in 2008 of President General Pervez Musharaf from the political scene in Pakistan. This had been apparent by a lack of high-level officials' visits from the Emirates. According to Wikileak cables, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the *de facto* ruler of UAE Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed held deeply negative perceptions regarding Pakistan's political elite in particular Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari.<sup>36</sup> The bilateral relationship was only rehabilitated with the election of Imran Khan as PM of Pakistan, as underlined by the official visit of Sheikh Mohamed in 2019 during which a financial support package for the country was announced.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Pakistan's refusal to participate in the Yemen war and the UAE's burgeoning strategic ties with India have taken a toll on bilateral ties. Moreover, the establishment of diplomatic relationship between UAE and Israel through the Abraham Accords was received negatively within Pakistan's strategic circles and the public. PM Khan made a veiled reference to UAE when in an interview he

suggested that he was under pressure from some friendly states to normalize ties with Israel.<sup>38</sup> A renowned Pakistani strategic expert close to Pakistan's military quarters declared this development as the maturation of joint Israeli–India threat to Pakistan and argued to open a joint naval base with China to counter these “probable Israeli designs” against Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman***

#### ***Bahrain***

Pakistan has maintained cordial ties with the Kingdom of Bahrain since 1971 when its status as a British Protectorate ended, and the archipelago nation became a fully independent state. Bahraini royal family has maintained strong ties with Pakistan and during his tour to Pakistan in 2014 the reigning Bahraini monarch Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa said that he was in his second home and the bonds of love and amity were deep rooted in culture and history.<sup>40</sup> The trend of Pakistani expatriates working in the Gulf also applies to Bahrain, and there are about 100,000 Pakistani expatriates in Bahrain (see Table 8.1). However, as compared to other Gulf states where a large number of Pakistanis have been employed as laborers, a key component of Pakistanis in Bahrain is employed within the Bahraini defense forces and police.<sup>41</sup>

This dynamic was at play when Bahrain was rocked by Arab Spring protests in 2011. It was alleged that Pakistani recruits in the Bahraini police were at the forefront of the crackdown against protestors and the recruitment of Pakistani servicemen also saw a major spike. With some estimates suggesting that this number could be up to 7,000, the visible presence of Pakistanis did result in some reactionary violence against Pakistani expatriates leading to several deaths.<sup>42</sup> Owing to the unique demography of Bahrain where the ruling house is Sunni and a majority of the population is Shia, Bahraini rulers have relied on foreign recruits to instill order within the state. The Bahraini royals also alleged Iran was behind the protests. This involvement of Pakistani security personnel working in Bahrain with consent of Pakistan's security institutions in a geopolitically sensitive event could have had repercussions for the country's relationship with Iran; yet the Pakistani security establishment did not interfere and green-lighted new recruitment.<sup>43</sup> This also shows that Pakistan's relationship with Gulf Arab states and Iran remains tilted in favor of the former. Since Bahrain is relatively smaller in size than its GCC neighbors and politically less of a significant player, Pakistan's relationship with Bahrain has always remained stable and cordial. It can be argued that within the GCC, Pakistan's ties with Bahrain remain most stable; even Bahrain's acceptance of Israel has not really impacted upon bilateral ties.

#### ***Qatar***

Pakistan has maintained strong ties with Qatar, which is home to a significant number of Pakistani expatriates that contribute toward its development in

different domains (Table 8.1). The discovery and subsequent development of the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) industry in Qatar has accrued the Gulf state with a considerable windfall of revenues. Thus, the movement of Pakistani expatriates to Qatar has been a relatively recent affair as compared to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or UAE where oil was commercialized much earlier. It is estimated that currently more than 150,000 Pakistanis are residing in Qatar.<sup>44</sup> As is the case in other Gulf countries, the security component within Pakistan–Qatar ties stands out. Although Pakistan’s formal defense cooperation with Qatar has remained limited to holding joint exercises, it is the informal domain where Pakistanis play a prominent role in the Qatari security forces. The author has met and interviewed several Pakistanis who are employed in various arms of Qatar’s security forces ranging from police to its military and air forces. This echoes a general trend within Gulf militaries where contract personnel from foreign countries fill up the lower rungs of the organizations.<sup>45</sup> Recently, Qatar’s navy donated its entire fleet of ten WS-61 Sea King helicopters to the Pakistan navy, which had faced a shortage of maritime utility helicopters.<sup>46</sup>

Over the last decade, the strategic nature of Pakistan’s relationship with Qatar has evolved significantly due to geopolitical developments and interpersonal ties between Pakistani rulers and Qatari royalty. In particular, the close personal and business ties between the family of former Pakistani PM Sharif and the former Qatari ruler Sheikh Hamad Bin Jasim contributed to the strengthening of bilateral relationship after Sharif came to power in 2013.<sup>47</sup> The intersection of this proximity, developments within Pakistan’s domestic political environment and the Gulf crisis of 2017 all created numerous challenges for Pakistan–Qatar bilateral ties. Pakistan and Qatar also closely worked alongside each other on the Afghanistan issue. Qatar had been the host of Taliban’s political office while Pakistan instrumentalized its considerable influence within Taliban’s rank and file to bring them to the negotiating table with the US, which finally resulted in an agreement between the two sides. Since the Taliban’s return to Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan and Qatar have been at the forefront of political engagement with the new regime in Kabul and have been coordinating their efforts. For example, both countries have urged the international community to release frozen Afghan assets.<sup>48</sup>

The bilateral relationship has progressed under PM Imran Khan, although he was at the forefront of those criticizing former PM Sharif’s links with Qatari royals. When Pakistan’s economy faced a severe balance of payment crisis in 2018–2019, Qatar stepped in to provide support with a package of \$3 billion worth of deposits and direct investment.<sup>49</sup> Bilateral engagement has been most prominent in the energy sector. In the case of Pakistan, the dependence upon LNG imports from Qatar is steadily increasing. Pakistan that is dependent upon natural gas for 43% of its primary energy demands has its own gas reserves falling at an annual rate of 9% and thus the dependence upon LNG will be even greater.<sup>50</sup> Yet the \$16 billion LNG deal signed with Qatargas in 2017 during the Sharif administration created significant political controversy within Pakistan as the then opposition accused the government of committing to an expensive agreement with no provision to renegotiate price for at least ten years.<sup>51</sup> The government of Imran

Khan that had opposed the former government's LNG deal with Qatar nonetheless concluded an LNG agreement of its own in 2021. However, the provisions of this deal are comparatively favorable for Pakistan not only because of amicable relationship between the two leaderships but also owing to global trends in LNG industry favoring short-term contracts and therefore a renegotiation of the price of LNG will be possible after four years. Additionally, this time the price has been set at 10.2% of Brent as compared to 13.37% in the previous deal.<sup>52</sup> This shows that regardless of partisan politics within Pakistan, both countries and their leadership remain close and are working to further streamline their strategic partnership.

### *Kuwait*

Pakistan has maintained strong and cordial ties with Kuwait. Former Kuwaiti Emir and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, known for his unique prowess at diplomacy and peace-making, played a key role in defusing tensions between Pakistani and Bangladeshi leaderships, which led to Pakistan's diplomatic recognition of Bangladesh during the 1974 Islamic Summit in Lahore.<sup>53</sup> Bilateral relations further strengthened during the 1980s when Pakistan under the leadership of General Zia-ul-haq established exemplary ties with all Gulf states. As Iraq invaded Kuwait, Pakistan like other Muslim countries did condemn the Iraqi actions but the ruling government of PM Benazir Bhutto was reticent in taking a tough stand through the imposition of economic sanctions or by sending Pakistani troops for a possible military action to expel Iraq from Kuwait.<sup>54</sup> However, Pakistan's stance changed after Bhutto was sacked and a caretaker government took over. Eventually, Pakistan did send troops but only to Saudi Arabia to defend Holy Places and Saudi border regions from possible attacks from Iraq.<sup>55</sup>

Pakistan's approach to the invasion of Kuwait must be understood against the backdrop of huge public support for Saddam Hussain as an icon of resistance against the US. Nawaz Sharif, who became premier after the October 1990 elections was close to the Saudi royal family and wanted to contribute Pakistani troops as part of the allied coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait. However, the then Pakistan Army Chief Aslam Baig Mirza considered the operation to liberate Iraq as a larger Zionist plot to weaken the Muslim world. This position was politically expedient for the former PM Benazir Bhutto. Still reeling from her ouster from power, anti-Americanism became a useful leverage against the incumbent government.<sup>56</sup> Despite these divisions within Pakistan, the Sharif government did prevail politically although Mirza, possibly irked by the American suspension of military aid, continued his praise of Iraqi "strategic defiance."<sup>57</sup> Pakistan's military subsequently took part in demining operations in Kuwait between 1991 and 1999; 9 Pakistani deminers lost their lives and 32 were injured.<sup>58</sup>

Kuwait continues to be a key destination of Pakistani expatriates in the Gulf, hosting more than one hundred thousand Pakistanis (see Table 8.1).<sup>59</sup> Leaders from both sides have exchanged visits but the relationship has remained rather cold. For instance, between 2011 and 2021 Pakistan was placed on a visa ban list. Following attempts by the Khan government to re-engage Kuwait,<sup>60</sup> the visa ban

was overturned, and Kuwait emerged as a new destination for Pakistani medical professionals.<sup>61</sup> Both states have grown closer politically owing to their attempts to stay out of regional conflicts and shared concerns about the rise of Islamophobia in particular in India. For example, it was Kuwaiti civil society and media figures that raised their voice against acts of violence targeting Muslims in India. The Kuwaiti government also called upon the OIC to address Islamophobia in India.<sup>62</sup> It can be argued here that as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are gradually gravitating toward India, Kuwait is perhaps the only Gulf state that has not followed suit. Politically, however, Pakistan still considers Kuwait a country of secondary importance in the Gulf region.

### *Oman*

The Sultanate of Oman is of great strategic significance for Pakistan as it is the only Gulf state with whom Pakistan shares a maritime border.<sup>63</sup> Historically, Oman had been politically and economically involved with the affairs of Balochistan's Makran coast largely because the Omani Sultan was gifted the enclave of Gwadar by the Khan of Kalat in late eighteenth century. This Omani sovereignty on Gwadar peninsula ended in 1958 as Pakistan, after extensive negotiations through the British government, purchased the peninsula for \$3 million.<sup>64</sup> Even though Gwadar formally became part of Pakistan, the Pakistani government allowed the recruitment of Omani armed forces from the Makran coast.<sup>65</sup> The Balochi population in Oman mainly hails from this region of Balochistan and over the time has been fully integrated into the Omani national fold. These Balochis played an important role in the Sultanate's military operations against the Dhofar rebels in 1970s.<sup>66</sup>

Both countries enjoy shared notions of regional political stability as shown by their stance in Yemen and in the crisis between Qatar and the Saudi-led quartet. However, security cooperation between Oman and Pakistan is rather limited compared to Pakistan's defense engagement with other Gulf states, the exception being the naval domain. A key reason for the significant naval partnership is the common stake in keeping the maritime waters of the Arabian Sea safe. Since the 1990s, both sides have been conducting joint naval exercises with the name of "Thamar Al Tayyib." The exercises are held after every two years with a first phase of harbor-based tactical and operational discussions followed by a second phase that entails sea-based operations. The focus of the sea-based phase has been upon counter-terrorism training, sea denial, and sea control operations and to test anti-air and anti-surface warfare tactics.<sup>67</sup> The recurrence of this naval exercise for more than two decades and the participation of large fleet ships and maritime patrol aircraft highlight that both countries place a premium on secure and stable maritime frontiers. Pakistan and Oman also signed a military cooperation agreement in 2020 to enhance existing military cooperation through exchange of knowledge and expertise.<sup>68</sup>

Despite this cooperation, Pakistan is concerned by the enhanced level of Indian-Omani strategic ties and security partnership. A case in point was the

Omani assent for the Indian navy to use its strategic port of Duqm and dry dock its warships there for maintenance. This gives India operational flexibility in the western Indian Ocean and alongside Pakistan's territorial waters.<sup>69</sup> India has also established a signal intelligence facility, also referred as a listening post, in Ras-al-Hadd close to the Pakistani coast.<sup>70</sup> Together with India's naval facilities in the Chabahar port of Iran, they pose a formidable challenge to Pakistan's maritime security and to the port of Gwadar, the lynchpin for CPEC. As pointed out by a former Pakistan naval officer, this Indian presence is significant enough to monitor, influence, and even choke sea lanes of Pakistan in its primary area of strategic interest, the North Arabian Sea.<sup>71</sup> This, in turn, has affected Pakistan's maritime security doctrine, which now emphasizes upon the Regional Maritime Security Patrol (RMSP) initiative. According to the former Pakistani Naval Chief Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi, the architect of Pakistan's maritime security doctrine, "RMSP launched in 2018 is focused on establishing maritime patrols along critical sea areas and choke points in the Indian Ocean region to augment maritime security and contribute to freedom of navigation."<sup>72</sup> A crucial axis of these maritime patrols has been the North Arabian Sea indicating the strategic importance of this maritime zone for Pakistan.

## **India and the Iran Factor**

India and Iran remain critical variables in Pakistan's relationship with Gulf states. However, this factor has been most pronounced when it comes to Saudi Arabia, the principal political player on the Arabian Peninsula. Hence this section will mostly focus on the debate in Pakistan with reference to Saudi Arabia and also the reaction from the Saudi side. India and Iran remain archrivals of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, respectively. In the case of Pakistan, Iran and India are its closest neighbors by land and in terms of strategic importance. Pakistan has fought three wars with India, and the two states are still deadlocked on Kashmir. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been vying for regional power with Iran. Iranian proxies have been ascendant in the region, carving out a dominant political role for themselves in several Arab capitals.<sup>73</sup> Still, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan do not share a land border and Iran may not be preparing to launch a direct military assault on the Kingdom. Nonetheless, Iran remains a patron of the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have continued to target Saudi population centers and installations with ballistic missiles and drones.<sup>74</sup>

### *Iran*

In this broader context, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have strategic expectations of each other vis-à-vis their enemies. However, owing to geopolitical complexities, economic priorities, and national security concerns, it can be difficult for the two nations to fully back each other's stances and initiatives.<sup>75</sup> Since the Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia has anticipated that Pakistan would be part of anti-Iran initiatives politically and security wise. Pakistan has helped its

Gulf ally in certain theaters where the presence of its operatives did not involve a direct confrontation with Iran.<sup>76</sup> Yet the possibility of Pakistan joining any anti-Iran political or security coalition or initiative remains highly unlikely. Pakistan's policy toward Iran is the epitome of reluctance to create new enemies and not specifically a balancing behavior.<sup>77</sup> As elaborated later, unlike Gulf countries whose strategic outlook do not pose a direct national security threat to Pakistan, Iranian strategic thinking is of crucial significance for Pakistan's national security.

Pakistan's rival, India, has been financing the development of Chabahar in Iran and has significant intelligence assets deployed across the Pakistan–Iran border. Pakistani Balochistan, which borders Iran, has witnessed a low-intensity insurgency by Baloch separatist organizations. These separatists as well as sectarian organizations active within Balochistan have been involved in attacks targeting security forces and civilians, resulting in a large loss of lives. Pakistani security sees all these activities as operations orchestrated and regulated by the Indian Intelligence Agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).<sup>78</sup> The arrest of a senior RAW agent, Kulbushan Yadav, in 2016 while he was entering from Iran into Pakistan, affirmed the apprehension of Pakistan's security apparatus apprehensions and also raised questions regarding Iranian complicity in these activities.<sup>79</sup> This prompted the Pakistani government and security institutions to demand that Iran investigate the activities of Indian intelligence operatives on its soil and curb them.<sup>80</sup>

Pakistani security agencies have also expressed concern about Iran's recruitment drive in Pakistan for the Zainabiyoun brigade operating in Syria. Pakistan's law enforcement agencies have acted against a local outlet involved in organizing recruitment for Syria in the restive tribal area of Kurram Agency, which is home to a significant number of Pakistani Shias.<sup>81</sup> Yet Pakistan is unwilling to raise the stakes with Iran further owing to several factors. Pakistan continually faces an active threat from India on its eastern border and continuation of cross-border attacks from Afghanistan on Pakistan's security forces even after Taliban take over makes the security situation on western border also fragile. Additionally, Pakistan's ties with the US have only deteriorated after American withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the strategic outlook of the two sides vis-à-vis South Asia does not run in parallel. Pakistan also wants to avoid any repeat of the scenario of the 1990s, when sectarian violence became the norm and a toxic social environment prevailed in the country. Due to these complications, Pakistan is attempting to engage with Iran to avoid any further complications in the bilateral ties that might push Iran further in the Indian camp. Even though the relationship between the two sides remains functional, Pakistan's decision to formally inform Iran regarding the nonviability of the Iran–Pakistani gas pipeline under the US sanctions depicts the poor state of bilateral ties.<sup>82</sup>

### *India*

By contrast, ties between India and Saudi Arabia have improved in the past fifteen years. To begin with, Saudi Arabia remained largely ambivalent toward India during the Cold War due to its proximity to the Soviet Union. Indian political support

for Iraq during the first Gulf war did not help the cause of Saudi–Indian ties and the relationship remained a tacit one, in which the bilateral engagement never attained a strategic outlook.

Things started to change with King Abdullah's tour of India in 2006, when he was the guest of honor at India's Republic Day ceremony.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps this was a sign that with the sharp rise in India's global profile and its emergence as one of the world's biggest economies, the Saudis decided to initiate a more proactive engagement. Saudi ties with India also witnessed another uptick in the defense realm. Talks held in Riyadh in 2010 between then Indian PM Manmohan Singh and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia resulted in a road map to further increase bilateral cooperation. This led to the first meeting of a Saudi–Indian joint committee on defense cooperation in 2012. Building on these engagements, an eventual Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation was signed in 2014 in India as the then Saudi crown prince and Defense Minister (and current King) Prince Salman toured the country. The terms of the agreement included joint exercises, training Saudi forces as well as sharing defense-related information.<sup>84</sup> Another key development has been the initiation of senior-level military visits between India and the Kingdom. This shows the Kingdom's resolve to diversify its defense partnerships.<sup>85</sup> Pakistan has remained the traditional and principle point of Saudi contact within security and defense domains in wider South Asia, so this new Saudi–Indian security partnership has been viewed with a considerable degree of skepticism within Islamabad's political and security circles.<sup>86</sup>

On the economic front, India has a significantly strong connection with the Kingdom and in 2021 became its second largest trading partner.<sup>87</sup> Saudi Arabia hosts a big number of Indian expatriate workers who are playing an important role in several vital sectors. In 2018, out of a global total of \$80 billion in remittances to India, Saudi Arabia amounted for nearly \$9.28 billion and thereby remained the third highest source of remittances.<sup>88</sup> Oil imports from Saudi Arabia account for 18% of India's overall petrochemical imports, making Saudi Arabia the second largest exporter of crude oil to India.<sup>89</sup> Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has invested \$1.5 billion into Reliance Industries Telecom Platform Jio.<sup>90</sup> Still, Saudi Arabia has avoided to support New Delhi's political narrative vis-à-vis Pakistan.<sup>91</sup> Yet in the face of increasing economic and energy partnerships between India and Saudi Arabia, it is more likely that Saudi Kingdom will de-link its relation with India from Pakistan.

## The Yemen Test to Pakistan–Gulf Ties

Pakistan's strategic relationship with Gulf states and particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE faced a major challenge when Pakistan refused to send its troops to support the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. The parliament session summoned to discuss the Yemen situation soon descended into chaos. Government members used the Yemen debate to settle scores with the main opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) which had just returned to the parliament after holding an anti-government sit-in in the capital for several months.<sup>92</sup> This ended

chances of a compromise between government and opposition that could have led to a course of positive action toward Saudi's request. The public discourse within Pakistan was averse to the idea of any military initiative that creates divisions within the Muslim world. This discursive unanimity in the public sphere allowed the government to resist joining the campaign on top of its own desire to stay out of Middle Eastern power politics.

From a military perspective, it was difficult for Pakistan to contribute troops to the Yemen campaign due to the overarching domestic commitments of the security forces. For more than eight years, Pakistan's military had been involved in a counter-insurgency campaign in the north-western tribal areas of the country against insurgents of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Pakistan military had also been active within Balochistan where the law-and-order situation had deteriorated owing to a Baloch separatist insurgency and sectarian killings.<sup>93</sup> With the military still involved in counter-terror operations across the country, it was difficult for Pakistan's military leadership to allocate troops for the Yemen war effort. Sensing the break down on Yemen, the Pakistani military's highest command scaled up its engagement with Saudi decision-makers to assuage Saudi concerns. First, the Pakistani military fully backed the Saudi initiative of an Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and accepted the Saudi request for Pakistan's former Army Chief General Raheel Sharif to lead the coalition.<sup>94</sup> The second step was the dispatch of over 1,000 Pakistani troops to the Kingdom in early 2018 under the auspices of the 1982 agreement. Additionally, the serving Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, successfully developed a working relationship with the new and powerful Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman.<sup>95</sup>

The Yemen affair also stagnated Pakistan's ties with the UAE. The reaction from the Emirati government and media outlets to the Pakistani refusal to send troops for the Yemen campaign was quite strong and, unlike in Saudi Arabia, was aired publicly. Both sides got into a war of words when the Emirati Deputy Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash severely criticized Pakistan's decision and implied that the country's political position was more in line with Iran and Turkey. On the Pakistani side, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan rejected the criticism and deemed it an insult toward the self-respect of Pakistan and a violation of diplomatic norms.<sup>96</sup> This partly prompted a revision of Emirati policy toward Pakistan and increased the pace of warming up toward India. For example, the Emirati Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed was the chief guest in the 2017 Indian Republic Day military parade. The presence of a large Indian expatriate community and India's rise as a new economic power on the world stage certainly also compelled decision-makers in Abu Dhabi to change their alignment patterns within South Asia.<sup>97</sup>

## Gulf Crisis 2017

The Yemen question was not the only crisis that rocked bilateral ties between the Saudi-Emirati duo and Pakistan. Both sides again failed to see eye to eye

when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt boycotted Qatar and severed diplomatic relations with it. Some news reports suggested that as Pakistan's then PM Nawaz Sharif flew to Riyadh to mediate between the Saudi-led quartet and Qatar, he was put in a catch-22 situation when King Salman of Saudi Arabia asked him whether he was with the Kingdom or not.<sup>98</sup> At that time, Sharif was in the midst of a court investigation into the Panama Papers scandal, and his sole defense rested on the letters sent by former Qatari PM Sheikh Hamad Bin Jasim to exonerate him from the charge of buying properties in London through laundered money.<sup>99</sup> In an interesting turn of events, the final letters from the Qatari prince in support of Sharif were received by the Pakistani Supreme Court at the same time that the Gulf crisis unfolded. For Sharif, taking a position in favor of Saudi Arabia would have come at a great cost and breached his one and only line of defense. Additionally, the Sharif government had inked a major LNG agreement with Qatar that had played a crucial role in alleviating the country's dire need for energy resources. Expatriate Pakistanis working in Qatar, mostly in relatively better job positions compared to those in other Gulf states would have also been affected by such a decision.<sup>100</sup>

Pakistan's neutrality was a rather understandable affair but its resolve to mediate between the two sides reflected a lack of understanding of the roots of the Gulf feud as well as the general political trends that had been prevalent within the Middle East since the emergence of the Arab Spring. With the arrival of the new Pakistani PM Imran Khan after the elections of July 2018 and the government's extensive attempts to rehabilitate ties with Saudi Arabia, the bitterness caused by Pakistan's position on the Qatar issue was reduced. There was also an attempt specifically by Pakistan's security apparatus to try to involve Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Afghan peace process. In the hopes of doing so, Pakistan brokered a meeting between the Taliban and the US special peace envoy, Zilmay Khalilzaad, in Abu Dhabi.<sup>101</sup> This brought both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi back to the Afghan talks but owing to some objectionable conditions being imposed on the Taliban, this initiative failed.<sup>102</sup>

## **Engagement with the US and China and Impact on Gulf Security**

### ***United States***

Pakistan's political and security relationship with the Arabian Gulf countries is shaped by its ties and strategic engagement with the US and China. Pakistan has remained for decades a key security partner of the US within South Asia similar to the Arab Gulf states and has often found common cause with both the US and the Gulf states with regard to the security environment of the greater Middle East. Pakistan has been part of the Bahrain-headquartered Combined Maritime Force (CMF). The CMF umbrella has played an important role in securing maritime environs within the Arabian Gulf and in the wider Arabian Sea. The CMF is also part of the US naval forces Central Command and thus remains a security entity

where the US navy works alongside its regional allies to ensure maritime security.<sup>103</sup> Pakistan has remained part of the CMF and has been contributing its naval assets as well as leading the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 and 151. CTF-150 which until recently was led by Pakistan navy is primarily tasked to ensure maritime security and conduct counter-terrorism operations outside the Arabian Gulf. This force thus remains a vital component of the maritime security architecture of the greater western Indian Ocean and conducts operations across the Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea. It has also been contributing toward the security of the Horn of Africa region. The CTF-151 on the other hand is a force dedicated toward anti-piracy operations and deterring armed robbery at sea.<sup>104</sup> In 2018, there were reports that Pakistan had left this task force<sup>105</sup> but it re-joined the force in 2020.

### *China*

Unlike the US, China is not integrated in the Gulf security infrastructure and its engagement with Gulf states remains economically oriented. China's relationship with Gulf states has risen to new heights thanks to its "economic diplomacy" which centers around strengthening bilateral trade and broader economic connectivity while putting aside contentious political issues. This approach has aided in furthering Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by aligning policy formulation, connecting logistic hubs, monetary coordination, unfettered commerce and trade, and public engagement.<sup>106</sup> CPEC the flagship project of BRI in general and the Pakistani port of Gwadar in particular offers Gulf states with a unique opportunity to reduce the distance and time for their oil exports to China which remain a pivot point in their bilateral relationships. Gwadar Special Economic Zone also provides these Gulf states with opportunities to invest within Pakistan and in CPEC projects. However, political concerns mainly from India regarding CPEC infringing on Indian sovereignty have held back Gulf states' engagement in CPEC.<sup>107</sup>

Saudi Arabia announced plans to construct an oil refinery in Gwadar in 2019. Yet the lack of infrastructural development in Gwadar and energy connectivity between the city and other urban centers inside Pakistan resulted in Saudi authorities finally abandoning this project.<sup>108</sup> Thus, in terms of economic activity Chinese investments within Pakistan have still not been able to attract similar engagement from the Gulf states. Still, the Chinese interest in Gwadar has considerably changed the security landscape of Pakistan's western coastal strip and has spurred Pakistan to develop its maritime security infrastructure. The construction of the Jinnah Naval Base in Ormara, 285 kilometers east of Gwadar serves this purpose. The development of Jinnah Naval Base has been happening alongside Pakistan's ongoing modernization of its navy which has resulted in the country acquiring Type-54A/P Frigate and Hangor Class Submarines from China, Milgem Class Corvettes from Turkey and developing a Long Range Maritime Patrol Program (LRMPP) alongside the Italian aerospace company Leonardo. Most of these assets are likely to be deployed at Jinnah Naval Base.<sup>109</sup> The emergence of this new naval

infrastructure right at the mouth of the Gulf of Oman will significantly impact upon regional maritime security environment and provide Pakistan with an enhanced level of sea denial and sea control capabilities. This will effectively transform Pakistan navy from a brown water or coast-centric force to blue water navy.<sup>110</sup> A special task force of Pakistan navy Task Force-88 (TF-88) has been raised and assigned the duty for the seaward security of Gwadar Port and protection of associated sea lanes against both conventional and non-traditional threats.<sup>111</sup> All these developments suggest that Pakistan and its coastal waters will be the pivot of any future Chinese security architecture in the Arabian Gulf region and its maritime environs.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistan remains invariably linked to the GCC states in the economic, geopolitical, and security domain. Pakistan's geographical proximity to the Arab Gulf region and its human connection in the form of nearly five million expatriates has led to the creation of strong political ties between the leaderships and the respective security stakeholders. Pakistan's stature as a trustworthy security partner for the Gulf region has faced challenges owing to the country's approach toward the Yemen conflict and Qatar crisis. A key reason for this has been Pakistan's reluctance to engage in conflict between Iran and the Gulf states. Nonetheless, Pakistan still remains economically dependent upon the financial support and expatriate remittances from the Gulf and thereby in any future confrontation between Iran and Gulf states will likely tilt in Gulf's favor.

The political, economic, and security competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific and the rise of India as a regional hegemon have greatly increased challenges to Pakistan's national security. The strengthening of strategic bonds between Gulf states and India remains a source of utmost concern for Pakistan as it is diminishing the country's status of a security partner of the Gulf. Yet, the development of CPEC projects, modernization of Pakistan's naval capabilities and a future Chinese role as a regional security provider may balance these dynamics while also increasing Pakistan's strategic relevance. This creates a new geopolitical challenge for the Gulf states as their maritime neighborhood will also become a theater of hostilities in a future Pakistan–India or China–India confrontation. Pakistan can attempt to cut off Indian assets inside the Arabian Gulf water and energy shipments to Indian ports. This will likely draw an Indian response that can jeopardize the strategic environment of the region. Similarly, a future Chinese security presence is likely to create friction with the US, thereby further complicating regional security environment.

Pakistan needs a foreign policy approach toward the Gulf that can help in preserving its political, strategic, and security baggage while simultaneously capitalizing on new opportunities that emerge. For this to happen, Pakistan needs to develop a better understanding of the domestic and foreign policy calculations of these states.

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## **9 Asia in an Emerging Gulf Collective Security Framework**

*N. Janardhan*

The United States' (US') chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 served as yet another opportunity for its allies in the Gulf to continue their foreign-security policy diversification efforts beyond Washington. The sharp US–Iran rhetoric and confrontation in 2019 and 2020, which also involved attacks on some facilities in or near the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, had already underlined the fraying West-centric security architecture in the region. It also highlighted the need to hasten the process of exploring alternative mechanisms to ensure peace and security in a region that is vitally linked to global economic and political interests. This brings to the fore Asian countries, many of which have witnessed a major shift in their economic might in recent decades, bearing the potential to alter the global political-security landscape, including the Gulf region.

During the last two decades, ties between Asia's biggest oil producers and consumers have grown exponentially. By feeding the energy demands of the Asian boom, the economies of the Gulf countries also grew rapidly. This oil-based 'East–East camaraderie' steadily expanded to boost non-oil trade and strategic cross investments in diverse sectors. Consequently, cumulative Gulf–Asia trade transactions exceeded that of the European Union (EU) and US combined.<sup>1</sup>

While this bonhomie was primarily rooted in economic factors, there were a few other issues that contributed to intensifying Gulf's relations with Asia – the impact of 9/11, 2001, which sowed seeds of suspicion in Gulf–West ties, thus encouraging Gulf–Asia investment; the GCC's dilution of religious affiliation and concentration on economic pragmatism, which helped them pursue new partnerships with Russia and China, for example; and the region's comfort factor with Asia, which does not link economic ties with a political reform agenda, unlike the US and EU. The Gulf's 'Look East' policy in the economic domain – especially the six GCC countries – may have also been motivated by the long-term calculation that the shift in economic power to the East could impact the West-dominated global political-security order, with wider implications for the region.<sup>2</sup>

Moving forward, Gulf–Asia ties will continue to grow deeper roots in the energy domain, including renewables, while diversifying into the non-oil sector. Thus, long before the US announced its strategic rebalancing policy of 'pivot' to Asia, the GCC countries had set their eyes on and recognized Asia as a future

ally. Though these ties were rooted primarily in transactional economic activities, they are slowly transforming to become agents capable of impacting geopolitics, with the possibility of an Asian-promoted ‘collective’ Gulf security architecture evolving in the future.

## **Proactive Gulf**

There have been increasing calls in recent years for the GCC countries to take stock of the situation, act independently and design future security arrangements, without leaving everything for the US to formulate, thus opening a window for Asian countries. It is true that though the GCC’s ties with Asia are expanding, no other international actor can singularly replace the US in the short-term future of the region. But that could change in the long term, perhaps around 2035 when the US may no longer be the biggest economy in the world.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the GCC countries are not a homogenous entity despite the Al Ula and Baghdad reconciliation efforts in 2021 among the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.<sup>4</sup> The six-member bloc could be divided into three groups – one, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain; two, Qatar; and three, Kuwait and Oman as the fence sitters. While there are major differences within the bloc on a number of regional issues, all the members have expressed interest in exploring alternative security scenarios in the region.

This stems from the fact that the GCC countries are increasingly finding themselves in a fix having to choose between their traditional security guarantor, the US, and their disagreements with many aspects of US policy since the turn of the century. They are increasingly convinced that events in the Middle East are beyond the scope of US influence, as is evident from the events in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, among others. Developments related to Iran, in particular, have certainly not been in the best interests of the GCC countries. Given the added pressure of the Gulf leadership being unable to provide the necessary security vision, two schools of thought prevail in the region: one urging less international involvement in the region’s affairs and the other, more.<sup>5</sup>

Experts arguing that the way out of the dilemma is through the withdrawal of external powers from the Gulf feel that they have precipitated the crises rather than contribute positively. Therefore, the new mantra is that “a lasting Gulf security system can only function if it is based on a regional initiative.”<sup>6</sup> But the situation on the ground – especially the lack of credible indigenous military capabilities, Saudi–Iran rivalry, differences among GCC members, and the lack of any other non-US security arrangement – is conducive neither to the complete removal of external forces nor to development of a regional alternative.

In such a situation, the only option is further internationalization of the region. Hence, the GCC countries are willing to consider intense political, economic, social, and even security ties with other countries to counter the prevailing notion that only American military power counts. To institutionalize this exploration, the GCC countries, along with economic diversification, have also intensified foreign policy diversification.

At the 2004 Gulf Dialogue in Bahrain, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal said: “Guarantees for Gulf security cannot be provided unilaterally even by the only superpower in the world … The region requires guarantees provided by the collective will of the international community.” Similarly, Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani told the United National General Assembly in 2007 that “the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, UAE’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr Anwar Gargash said:

In today’s world, the stability of the region cannot rest on American engagement alone. Other actors, including Russia, China, India, and the European Union also have an important role to play, which is why our foreign policy seeks to consolidate relations with these actors.<sup>8</sup>

The GCC countries’ ties with the US improved during President Donald Trump’s tenure. The US pulling out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and killing Qassem Soleimani, the popular head of Iran’s Al Qods, helped their cause. But within months of the Joe Biden administration assuming charge it was clear that the Trump era cordiality would be unsustainable. It is more likely that US–GCC ties would be closer to what the Barack Obama administration had envisaged, particularly with regard to renegotiating the JCPOA with Iran, thus encouraging GCC–Iran cooperation over confrontation. Further, the UAE’s withdrawal from Yemen and the end of the quartet’s boycott of Qatar and the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s reconciliation talks with Turkey are developments that are partly conditioned by the expectation that the Biden administration would be less involved in the region’s affairs.

The chaotic chain of events in Afghanistan in 2021 only reinforced the perception of the ineffectiveness and unreliability of the US.

The US’s mistakes have been catastrophic recently, and it will be necessary for the Gulf states to learn lessons from them. It is time to reduce dependence on Washington in the strategic realm. Trust in the US also needs to be reviewed, and a deep and fundamental reconsideration is needed. Even the old association with the US that suited the circumstances of the 20th century may not fit those of the 21st century, nor may it fit the circumstances of the emergence of the Gulf as a rising force in the Arab region.<sup>9</sup>

This inconsistent US approach, along with the shift in the economic power center from the West to the East, has encouraged the GCC countries to build ties with a host of alternatives, particularly in Asia, including China, India, Japan, and South Korea, among others (and Russia and Turkey too).

The shifting economic, military, and political power from the West to the East is particularly evident in China’s growth. India, Japan, and others in Asia, who also are technologically advanced and economically linked to all continents, are also part of the mix. This phenomenon has hurt the American and European abilities to influence the world like they did previously.<sup>10</sup>

While cultivating the new relationship, the region is linking its economic interests and security needs. And, apart from the importance of energy, Asian countries, especially China and India, are showing signs of relating the relevance of the Gulf region to transnational security issues such as proliferation of weapons, crime, drugs and terrorism, and their impact on their domestic conditions.

Thus, rather than put all their eggs in one basket, this ‘omni balancing’ means the region’s ties with the US are no longer US-centric.<sup>11</sup> It is in this context that some scholars have been propagating the idea of upgrading the GCC-Asia buyer-seller relationship to a strategic one. They are also exploring possibilities for a new collective security architecture, which would involve both Asian and Western powers.<sup>12</sup> It is still early days, but the attempt is to build on the present conducive economic and political warmth to chart out a strategic security dimension to the relationship.

However, the US administration is in no mood to relent. Reflecting the prevailing contention in Washington, then-Secretary of State Clinton stressed that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the US will be right at the center of the action.”<sup>13</sup> Such assertions and growing economic and political competition between the US and China, and their allies, throws up the possibility of intense competition over influence and discord over the long-term interests of the GCC countries. The targeted killing of Soleimani triggered a debate about Washington’s real strategy – was it Washington’s swansong or a fresh start to reclaim its preeminence?<sup>14</sup> Some analysts also pointed out that the Abraham Accords are Washington’s way of checking Beijing and Moscow’s growing involvement in the region by promoting US ally Israel as an alternative economic, technological, and security partner in the region. This is seen as a method by which the US can continue its phased disengagement without ceding space to its strategic rivals.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the fact that the GCC countries are even willing to consider alternatives amid confusing signals from the US, and even displeasure with and fatigue about the US, is the real ‘strategic’ shift occurring in the region.

Simultaneously, it is interesting to note the proactive role of the GCC countries in exploring indigenous options to achieve stability in the region even if they have not produced the intended results. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have been part of the political and military developments in Libya and Syria after the Arab Uprising in 2011, and thereafter in Yemen. These countries also played an important role in the joint war against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, which had several Asian countries as partners.

As part of this experimental effort to explore regional solutions to regional problems, some Gulf countries have expanded their military capabilities and transformed themselves from being security recipients to becoming security providers. Further, from seeking mediation, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, served as mediators in the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal in 2018.

## **US Confusion**

These changes in foreign and security policies were partly conditioned by the US’s insistence to invade Iraq in 2003 and the failure to limit the ensuing chaos,

the support for Arab Spring in 2011 and the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, which compromised the GCC countries' security concerns. The inaction in the Syrian war and the uncertainty after Washington walked out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 left the region divided more than ever.

If these increased the region's fatigue about the US, they also forced a 'weary' US to rethink its policies. The gist of President Barack Obama's foreign and defense policies in the State of the Union address in 2014 was that Washington would limit US military intervention in conflicts around the world, without neglecting global terrorism. This policy indirectly reflected the desire to focus on domestic issues over its international role.

At the heart of this policy was Obama's recognition of a major reason for the US economic slump – the George W. Bush administration's Afghan and Iraqi misadventures, which may finally cost the US about \$6 trillion. These "most expensive wars in US history" will impact US federal budgets for decades.<sup>16</sup> Among others, this made Americans favor a diminished US security role abroad. Various opinion polls have shown that a majority of Americans feel that Washington should "mind its own business internationally and let other nations get along the best they can on their own." This is the most emphatic response on this issue in about five decades. This has been qualified by an overwhelming majority wanting Washington to "concentrate more on national" than international problems.<sup>17</sup>

These sentiments and Obama's recognition of the same were encapsulated in the 2014 statement: "Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail."<sup>18</sup> Further, the Obama administration viewed the GCC countries as "free riders," who need to "share" the Middle East with Iran. However, what received less publicity is another candid Obama comment:

There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It is a playbook that comes out of the foreign policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarised responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions.<sup>19</sup>

Donald Trump's campaign slogan of "America first" and his election as President were viewed as signs that Washington would gradually look more inwards than during the Obama era. However, the Trump administration may have realized that diminishing global influence was also a reason for its economic slump. In order to reverse the US's sliding economy, the Trump administration ramped up its activist role in many parts of the world, including the Middle East. Despite its aggressive stance and action against Iran, the Trump administration started looking inwards in the build-up to the 2020 presidential election.

This was evident during the June 2019 crisis in the Gulf when Trump argued that China, Japan, and South Korea receive huge supplies of energy resources from the Gulf region. "So why are we protecting the shipping lanes for other countries for zero compensation. All of these countries should be protecting their own ships."<sup>20</sup> This suggests that

the US is on its way out. Leaders in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, and Muscat understand what is happening. They have been worrying about the US commitment to their security for some time and ... making overtures to China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

## **Asian Security Expansion**

As the economic might of some of the principal Asian powers grows, their military influence is likely to intensify as well. The leading Asian contenders for a possible security role in the Gulf are China and India, with whom the GCC countries have robust relations. The fact that both countries also have good relations with Iran – which some of the GCC countries are uncomfortable about – means that Asia could be a more constructive part of the security dynamic in the region than the US. In addition, they could also play the role of an honest peace broker in any future GCC–Iran rapprochement, which the US is unwilling or incapable of doing.

Further, China and India are bound to take part in any ‘post-free riders’ arrangement that safeguards their interests, thereby overlapping with the security requirements of the region. Some of the developments in and statements of both countries point to the possibility of an Asian role in the security architecture in the Gulf being more than rhetoric in the long run. In a bid to fill the evolving vacuum, Russia, Turkey, and Japan are also proposing and assuming interesting positions. If the Gulf countries’ recent security initiatives are included in the mix, there are already indications of an evolving ‘collective’ mechanism.

## **China and BRI’s Security Footprint**

Beijing has been a “status quo power that often punches below its weight in international politics.”<sup>22</sup> China’s current Middle East policy is just one element of its overall goal of addressing this. While Chinese policies are clearly aimed at ensuring energy security, China is equally interested in increasing its influence in a region that is weighing the US presence, thereby challenging American control to complement its own global ambitions.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca are likely to facilitate a major part of China’s energy imports, Beijing has invested heavily in building its Maritime Silk Road Initiative. The surveillance stations, naval facilities and airstrips that Beijing is either building or contemplating to safeguard the oil route have long-term strategic ramifications. Beijing also wishes to reduce the vulnerability of its Middle Eastern oil supply to US power.

Since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has focused on connectivity and cooperation among countries in Europe, Asia, including the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Iran is an important element of the BRI. Though the BRI is primarily an economic tool and does not feature a ‘formal’ security footprint, the countries involved could use economic engagement to explore tentative Chinese involvement in managing the security affairs of the region in the future. This

stems from the fact that Chinese companies and government are bolstering security to protect their investments, projects, and people along the BRI routes.<sup>25</sup>

The establishment of the naval base in Djibouti, astride the Bab-el-Mandeb – the key chokepoint connecting Asia and Europe – in 2017 is likely to be a ‘laboratory’ to learn about using foreign military facilities to protect its citizens and commercial interests abroad. This might influence China’s plans for other overseas bases in the future, including one in the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Its Marine Corps, which is already deployed in Djibouti, could also become its primary rapid response force in the BRI countries in the Indian Ocean littoral. In one of its first acknowledgments, a year after the Djibouti base was established, the Ministry of National Defence said that the new facility would help Beijing “better fulfil China’s international responsibilities, including anti-piracy work and maintaining peace and stability of Africa and the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Among other examples of China’s growing naval strength, three stand out. First, 31 Chinese naval fleets escorted 6,600 ships between 2008 and 2018 in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia. Of these 3,400 or 51.5% were foreign vessels. Further, over 70 ships in danger were rescued.<sup>27</sup> Second, China has secured the title of the “world’s largest navy,” with the US Office of Naval Intelligence confirming that the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has surpassed the US Navy in total battle force ships, 360 to 297, with future projections expecting the gap to grow due to US budgetary constraints. By 2025, the PLAN is predicted to field as many as 400 vessels whereas the US plans only to field 355.<sup>28</sup> Finally, foreseeing an important economic-political-security linkage through development of ports, Chinese companies are involved in the building and maintenance of over 40 ports in about 35 countries, including the Middle East and Gulf.<sup>29</sup>

While these examples indicate that China is quite active in the region, the problem is that Beijing does not want to take sides in a region that expects a clear stance. In the current context, this is a prudent policy – one that was acknowledged even by President Obama. China is a “free rider … can’t the US be a little bit more like China?”<sup>30</sup> Beijing has long espoused a policy of ‘non-interference’ in other countries’ internal affairs. It opposed the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and voted with Russia to block action to end President Bashar Al Assad’s rule in Syria. It did not take part in the coalition of 60-odd countries’ fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), despite its oil interests in Iraq and reports of Chinese Muslims fighting there.

While Beijing committed combat troops to Mali in 2013 and has more personnel in blue helmets in Africa than any other permanent member of the Security Council, it is a reluctant actor in the Middle East. This is because it feels it still does not have the ‘ability’ to lead in resolving current conflicts in the region. However, Beijing’s first Arab Policy Paper in 2016 sets out the country’s development strategies with Arab countries and mirrors its readiness to cooperate with them to ensure a win-win situation. More importantly, it reiterates its political commitment to peace and stability in the Middle East, which is mutually beneficial.<sup>31</sup>

Within days of releasing this paper, President Xi Jinping made his first tour of the Middle East since assuming office. By visiting Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt,

especially during the height of the Riyadh–Tehran feud, Beijing clearly demonstrated that the region is very much a part of its strategic focus, perhaps extending beyond business interests.

Overall, an expanding BRI, rapid modernization of security forces, development of naval capabilities and ports infrastructure, increasing arms exports, rising stock of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are indications of its interest in being a global political and security actor, which could impact the developments in the Gulf.

## **China’s Conflict Management Strategy**

In support of China’s efforts to safeguard and promote the country’s economic interests, Chinese scholars are suggesting diplomatic tactics, particularly in the Middle East, that could help strengthen Beijing’s developing global security policy.<sup>32</sup> These tactics include mediation to defend commercial rather than security interests; conflict ‘management’ instead of ‘resolution’; and promoting a harmonious relationship among China’s strategic partners, many of whom are deeply divided and involved on conflicting sides of proxy wars.

The ideas serve two purposes. First, they dilute criticism about Beijing being uninterested and punching below its weight in contributing to the stability of the Middle East. Instead, they portray Beijing as seriously considering various options for greater political engagement in regional and global affairs. Second, they promote the Chinese notion of a balanced diplomatic approach that relies more on deft mediation rather than any form of aggressive intervention.

One idea, ‘quasi-mediation diplomacy’ promotes defending “commercial, political and diplomatic interests rather than core security and strategic interests.” A state investing in this model “acts without seeking to dominate; to follow rather than to lead; to partake in the revision of the agenda rather than setting it; and to encourage conflict de-escalation in lieu of determinedly engaging in conflict resolution.” Such an approach would involve “multifaceted intervention, proactive involvement, limited intercession and indirect participation,” which would minimize China’s risks amid the region’s conflicts.<sup>33</sup> Adding to this approach is the stress on China “seeking common ground while reserving differences,” implying a tilt toward conflict management rather than conflict resolution.

The idea of working with competing countries to ensure that prevailing tensions do not escalate is now being extended to rivalries involving countries that could significantly impact the BRI. It focuses on conflict management with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand and Iran and Turkey on the other. This idea is gaining more traction after the Iran–China strategic accord, spanning energy, infrastructure, and defense sectors, was signed in 2021.<sup>34</sup> With the Biden administration still interested in rejoining the Iran nuclear deal, despite hardliner Ebrahim Raisi assuming presidency, Beijing and Tehran may see an opportunity to strengthen their comprehensive partnership.

## **India's Neighborhood Policy**

India is the next big potential player in any future Gulf security scenario.<sup>35</sup> While energy security is certainly a factor, its expanded security perspective is driven by necessity, ambition, and opportunity. The desire to lead coincides with its rise as a major power with continental aspirations. Indian former prime ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh urged looking beyond the immediate neighborhood. Singh said “the Gulf region is a part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood.”<sup>36</sup>

Since then, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government has accelerated India’s outreach with visits to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, and several other countries in the region, including Iran and Israel. Some countries in the region, like the UAE for example, have made “a strategic commitment to help India’s rise as a regional player, the sort of language they had used in the past only for Japan and the US.”<sup>37</sup>

After Pakistan, China, Russia, and the US, the Gulf is the focus to ensure against any maritime or landward threat to it from the region, serve as a base to pursue India’s interests, confront terrorism and extremism, as well as tap the investment potential. The security of the Gulf countries, as well as the wider Middle East, is of paramount concern and New Delhi is ready to contribute to the stability of the region by sharing its experience in combating terrorism, maritime security, and military training. “The key focus in our external relations is ensuring the stability and security of the region, comprising the arc of nations from the Gulf to East Asia.”<sup>38</sup>

As economic growth helps India make rapid progress, it is beginning to lean toward greater strategic realism. A key part of this program is to transform the Indian Navy from a ‘brown water’ coastal defense force to a formidable ‘blue water’ fleet. The Navy’s aim is not just to patrol the seas but have the capacity to create and “deploy battalion-sized forces at various strategic points … [on] short notice, and disperse them quickly from the landing or dropping zone before any adequate enemy response.”<sup>39</sup> The inference is that the expansion program envisions possible intervention in countries in India’s ‘sphere of influence.’

Aware of the need for greater collective security cooperation in the region, the Indian Navy is promoting the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium to enable sustained interaction among the naval chiefs of the countries belonging to the Indian Ocean rim. New Delhi obtained strategic naval access to Sabang port, Indonesia, in 2018. This increased India’s access to important ports abroad to four, with the others in Oman, Seychelles, and Iran.

The Riyadh Declaration of 2010 and the Abu Dhabi Declaration of 2015 strategically elevated the partnership to the next (comprehensive) strategic level. India and the UAE expanded their relationship beyond the traditional areas of energy, trade, and community. Instead, they are tapping new opportunities in enhanced defense and security realms, including their first joint naval exercises in 2019. The two countries have framed these new relations in a Comprehensive

Strategic Partnership agreement that was signed in New Delhi in 2017. Going beyond the ‘bilateral,’ the two countries have agreed to cooperate “in their shared maritime domain in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions,” where both have substantial interests in the energy, trade, investments, and human resources domains.

While India and Saudi Arabia agreed in 2019 to start joint naval exercises in 2020, the 2008 India–Oman and India–Qatar defense pacts serve as good templates for future India–GCC security cooperation. The pact with Qatar, described as an agreement “just short of stationing (Indian) troops” in Qatar “lays out a structure for joint maritime security and training as well as exchange of visits.”<sup>40</sup> Qatar, thus, became the first country in the Middle East to sign such a pact with India.

Speaking at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore in 2018, Prime Minister Modi placed ‘Indo-Pacific region’ – which stretches

from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas” and includes the Gulf region – at the centre of India’s global engagement, both from economic and security perspectives. India, he pointed out, promotes collective security to ensure that the global transit routes remain peaceful and free for all.<sup>41</sup>

### **India–UAE–France Trilateral**

India’s cooperation has intensified with some of the big powers too. Indian and Australian warships conducted joint exercises in the Bay of Bengal in early 2019, followed by an anti-submarine exercise with the US Navy near Diego Garcia. Further, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, the foreign ministers of the ‘Quad’ – US, Japan, India, and Australia – met together for the first time and discussed mechanisms to promote an open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. They “reaffirmed their commitment to shared values and cooperation on maritime security, infrastructure and connectivity in support of rules-based frameworks.”

In 2020, France invited India to join forces with the European Union’s naval monitoring mission in the Gulf. The “EU has operations and China is also developing influence in the region. India is invited to join us in this monitoring mission by bringing capacities. This will be an occasion to demonstrate convergence and the capacity to operate together,” French President’s Diplomatic Adviser Emmanuel Bonne said. The cooperation possibilities revolved around military equipment, maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean, exchanging information and working on doctrinal and operational aspects of naval, air, and space coordination.<sup>42</sup>

In an indication that France and India may have a different approach on China compared to the one promoted by the US as part of the Quad, Bonne said: “We should not counter China but compel China to walk in the same framework as us,” a line that India would be happy to work with despite its differences with China, which escalated to a major border row in 2020. Such a non-confrontationalist approach would suit the interests of the Gulf countries and encourage their participation as part of a potential Quad-Plus arrangement in the future, which could

include France, Germany, and the Netherlands, all of them with Indo-Pacific strategies. Ruling out a role for NATO in the Indo-Pacific, Bonne said: “We would be happy to work with Japan, India, Malaysia, and Singapore, while Quad members, being close to France, can develop a more integrated strategy.”<sup>43</sup>

In more concrete developments in the maritime domain, the UAE joined France and India for trilateral naval exercises in the Gulf waters in 2021.<sup>44</sup> India is looking to post Navy Liaison Officers at the European maritime surveillance initiative in the Strait of Hormuz for improved Maritime Domain Awareness.<sup>45</sup> France is also conducting another trilateral with the Indonesian and Australian navies, which would naturally be of interest to the Gulf countries.

But like China, India also has its red lines, which was evident in an Indian statement after the pact with Qatar in 2008: “We will go to the rescue of Qatar if Qatar requires it, in whatever form it takes ... (But) India will not station troops in any foreign country. We don’t want to fight other people’s wars in foreign countries.”<sup>46</sup> And New Delhi, like Beijing, has resisted taking sides, by maintaining strategic ties with both Iran and the GCC countries.

Although India has publicly stated its interest in the Gulf region’s sea lines of communication remaining open and flowing, it has no ambition to become a US-style protector of Gulf security. This would run counter to its longstanding policy of avoiding alliances or military groups, and refraining from foreign military deployments not mandated by the United Nations. More broadly, India is loath to risk damaging its core interests in the region by seeking a conspicuously active or ambitious role.

India has underlined that its relations with the Gulf are rooted in four parameters: “non-descriptive, non-intrusive, non-judgemental and not taking sides in intra-regional disputes.” This enables India to simultaneously have close relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. This is reflected in its ‘Think West’ strategy:

If the eastern front is building upon longstanding policy, the western one is relatively more recent conceptually, even if India has had a historical presence in the Gulf... (but) ‘Act East’ would be matched with ‘Think West’ ... The prospects of fossil fuel, attractions of a more decisive and high growth India, and sharp intra-regional competition have all combined to open up new opportunities for India in the Gulf ... This may be expected to be a major focus of Indian diplomacy.<sup>47</sup>

## Turkey

While the Gulf is already trapped in a Saudi–Iran conundrum, a new layer of tension has been added over the last decade following Turkey’s active interest in the region. With Turkey clearly siding with Qatar following the 2017 blockade, its ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE turned fractious. Turkey, which is increasingly moving away from Europe and looking East, opened a new military base in Qatar (and has played active roles in Syria and Libya that have countered

American and Saudi-UAE moves), leading to accusations that it harbors a desire to reclaim the political and religious leadership of its erstwhile Ottoman Empire, especially in the Arab world.

These dynamics accentuated following Ankara's attempt to make political capital out of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder in Istanbul in 2018. Though Turkey is likely to curb Iran's influence to some degree, which could be the factor encouraging nascent reconciliatory talks with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2021, its role is likely to complicate international relations in the Gulf.<sup>48</sup> But its ambitions and actions as a regional military power are here to stay.

### **Russia–China–Iran Front (and Pakistan Too)**

Incidentally, China's proposed ideas for conflict management are in line with the 2019 Russian endorsement of Iran's proposal for a "non-aggression pact" with the GCC countries that could significantly reduce the risk of disputes spinning out of control, thus protecting China's economic stakes.<sup>49</sup>

In another far-reaching development, China joined Russia and Iran in their first-ever trilateral naval exercise in late 2019. A few months earlier, China backed a Russian proposal to explore an alternate security system for the Gulf. The Russian proposal prescribes creation of a "counter-terrorism coalition (of) all stakeholders," including the Gulf states, Russia, China, the US, the European Union, and India, among others. It urges a "universal and comprehensive" security system that consolidates "the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions."<sup>50</sup> More interestingly, some reports suggest that Iran is even contemplating providing "basing rights for Russia at its ports of Bandar Bushehr and Chabahar," which requires a constitutional amendment.<sup>51</sup> Russia's underlying argument is that it pursues good ties with all the relevant parties. The same is the case with China, India, Japan, and South Korea too.

While Russia may have viewed this as an alternative to the US-centric security mechanism, China appeared to be approaching this as a plurilateral approach by committing only non-combat forces. Some scholars viewed this as a "preference for a continued US lead in maintaining Gulf security."<sup>52</sup> This, it feels, would allow it to remain neutral in the tension between the Gulf camps.

Pakistan's growing ties with China could revive Islamabad's strategic role in the region, thus widening the pool of potential role players in the region's security realm.

### **Japan and South Korea**

Amid US–Iran tension in December 2019, Japan approved a controversial plan to send its naval troops to the Middle East to guarantee the safety of its oil tankers. Interestingly, despite being a US ally, Japan's ships were not part of the US-led coalition in the region's waters, thus ensuring neutrality between Iran and its Arab neighbors.<sup>53</sup>

Japan, which is in the midst of a major revision of its ‘pacifist’ defense guidelines, including buying new weaponry and upgrading existing arsenal, is also upping its diplomatic outreach. Though it did not yield any result, Japan sought to mediate in the regional conflict, involving the US, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visiting Iran in June 2019 and its Arab competitors in January 2020.<sup>54</sup>

Seoul too is now offering peacekeeping, restoration, anti-piracy, and training missions. The UAE, for example, is availing some of these facilities. Since 2011, a battalion of about 130 South Korean *Akh* (brother) Unit soldiers have been taking turns every year to train their UAE counterparts.<sup>55</sup> Further, South Korea’s exports of defense industry products to the UAE during the 2011–2016 period increased to \$31 billion.<sup>56</sup>

## Gulf Push

In the region’s diversifying security scenario, the role of the Gulf countries is equally important. The Western Indian Ocean, which is home to the Suez Canal, Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf, is the new regional competitive theater. Several Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Iran, and Turkey too, are seeking to spread their geopolitical influence in a region that is at the crossroads between Eastern Africa, the Gulf, and Southern Asia.

Amid friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this has also encouraged intra-Gulf competition in three geostrategic spheres – commercial ports, military agreements and bases, and choke-points – and exposed intra-GCC competition with Qatar getting Somalia’s support in the Gulf blockade in June 2017, while the Maldives sided against it.<sup>57</sup>

With regard to the development of ports, establishment of new special economic zones like Duqm in Oman and King Abdullah Economic City and NEOM in Saudi Arabia means competition to existing facilities in the region. The competition over military bases is even more intense. Saudi Arabia’s interest in Djibouti; the UAE’s temporary base in Assab, Eritrea, push for bases in Berbera, Somaliland, and military cooperation with Seychelles; Iran’s inroads in Tanzania; and Turkey’s bases in Qatar and Somalia (and efforts in Sudan) have kept the security scene buzzing with strategic moves that are seeking to fill the space emerging from US disengagement.

Oman’s strategy of allowing all major stakeholders of the Indian Ocean – China, India, the US, and the United Kingdom – to open ports is a new trend. It indicates that the Gulf countries are seeking a new strategy of avoiding competition among the great powers.

Iran too has been actively showcasing its presence in the region’s waters. In cooperation with India, it launched in 2017 the first phase of a strategic port in Chabahar. This is aimed at a multi-modal trade corridor connecting India to Central Asia.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have showcased their bid to diversify their security options not just through strategic partnerships with countries other than the US.

They are also actively promoting acquisition of modern military equipment and boosting domestic defense industries, by partnering with global defense firms. The UAE's slow but sure transition from a 'soft' to 'smart' power though consistent and heavy defense spending,<sup>58</sup> as well as military involvement in regional unrest led it be designated as the 'Gulf Sparta'.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, for example, the UAE set up a Defence and Security Development Fund to boost its weapon's production sector, both for domestic use and for exports. Showcasing progress, the Fund increased its stake in naval systems technology firm Marakeb Technologies from 30% to 50% in 2021.

As the US Congress tightens rules on selling certain weapons (especially armed drones) to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, China and Russia have stepped in. The UAE and Saudi Arabia used Chinese drones in Yemen. Turkey's Otokar and the UAE's Tawazun have partnered to jointly produce a Rabdan armored vehicle, which is being used in the UAE. Another UAE firm Calidus, in a tie-up with a Saudi firm, is working toward producing a light attack aircraft.<sup>60</sup> The UAE is clearly prioritizing "cyber security, autonomous weapons, advanced technology such as artificial intelligence in defense applications."<sup>61</sup> Further, following a period of tension, signs of a revised and recalibrated approach emerged in late 2019 when the UAE pulled out from Yemen and held talks with Iran's maritime officials, the first such dialogue since 2013. It was also widely reported that Iraq and Pakistan were trying to mediate and ease Saudi–Iran tension.

The US is clearly flustered by some of these developments, especially China's advances. Washington has been pressuring the GCC countries to limit their engagement with Beijing, particularly in the technology sector. In May 2020, flagging Huawei's role in the UAE's 5G infrastructure projects, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker said that it would make it "difficult" for US and GCC forces to communicate. "These states have to weigh the value of their partnership with the US."<sup>62</sup>

In another example, Washington reiterated its willingness to impose sanctions on allied nations if they buy Russian weapons systems. "It's very important going forward that Turkey, and for that matter all US allies and partners, avoid future purchases of Russian weaponry, including additional S-400s," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in 2021.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Traditionally, Gulf–Asia diplomacy rested on promoting cooperation between hydrocarbon exporters and importers. Asian countries took the lead to strengthen 'security of supply' by building emergency oil supplies and expanding renewable fuels to ward off energy being used as a political lever in international affairs. They continue to search for new reserves, augmenting supplies from traditional suppliers and sealing new acquisition deals around the world. Thus, energy issues are likely to both influence the long-term political economies of the GCC countries and shape global affairs in the coming decades.

But a robust Gulf–Asia relationship should look beyond the dynamics of hydrocarbons, trade and expatriates. The new paradigm should include strategic

political and security dimensions as well. The common political and security concerns on both sides provide an ideal platform to engage in peace and stability initiatives. This assessment is based on the following premises:

- a. a mere buyer-seller or transaction-based Gulf–Asia relationship is unsustainable in the long run;
- b. the GCC countries would take Asia seriously only if it is willing to be involved beyond trade;
- c. diminishing US interest and influence in the region – as demonstrated by the ‘Pivot to Asia’ and ‘America First’ pronouncements – mandates the need to explore alternative scenarios for Gulf security, to protect the interests of both the producers and consumers;
- d. growing military capabilities of Asian powers could be tapped as alternatives, as part of a larger collective security architecture that includes the US, Russia, European powers, and Turkey; and
- e. since many of the GCC’s principal partners in Asia are also strategic partners with Iran, they may be able to play a constructive role in any future attempt at GCC–Iran rapprochement, thereby holding the possibility of contributing to peace and stability in the region.

The challenge, however, is if Asian-promoted collective security architecture would be able to succeed in contributing to stability, security, cooperation, and growth instead of being mired in suspicion and insecurities. Two issues are major stumbling blocks. First, despite the rapprochement bids under way, the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s friction with Iran means that there is limited scope to take this process forward at present. Second, there is also inadequate Asian consensus to work toward realizing this process due to India–Pakistan rivalry, India–China competition, Japan–South Korea tension, and many of these countries’ reluctance to work with China.<sup>64</sup>

To overcome these challenges, it would be worth continuously discussing these issues at a series of Track II or Track 1.5 meetings, first involving China, India, Japan, South Korea, and a few GCC countries. This could be expanded later to include more Gulf countries, Asian and European powers, as well as Russia and the US. While the outcome is far from assured, continued exploration of such an idea at least reflects a ‘collective’ approach to Gulf security, which is the need of the hour and has received limited attention.

The reluctance of the principal Asian powers to take the first step is comprehensible. They are being adventurous in inaction. They could be thinking: why invest in cleaning the mess that the West has created? Asian countries, especially China and India, still have plenty of domestic issues to address. Given their vast population, they are still a long way from achieving prosperity across the board, which is key to their political stability. The recent global economic slowdown is also likely to encourage conservatism over adventurism. They have also learned from America’s misadventures in the region, where Washington has failed to turn things around after military interventions over the last few decades, which

combined to strain its economy and exposed its inability to mend problems that it set out to fix.

In such a milieu, the assertion that Asia could play a positive role in addressing the Gulf quagmire stems from the following factors: first, Asia's economic success could impede or accelerate depending on how the Gulf tension pans out; second, there is no military solution to the GCC–Iran row, with or without the US; and diplomacy is the only way forward; third, the US cannot be an honest peace broker in any GCC–Iran rapprochement bid because it will always be biased in favor of one party, thus hurting serious peace efforts; and finally, Asia's economic stakes with both parties and its expanding political-security imprint in the region makes it a more suitable facilitator for peace between the two principal opponents.

The need and possibility of wider involvement in Gulf affairs has received support from American scholars and former diplomats too. One view is that “without coordination between the US, Russia, China, the European Union, India, and Muslim allies (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran),” no strategy can be effective in the Middle East.<sup>65</sup> It has also been pointed out that Washington’s support for one of the warring Gulf actors means an amicable solution will remain elusive. “By throwing its full weight behind the Saudis against Iran, the US assures that no regional agreements will be reached without the unlikely capitulation of Iran.”<sup>66</sup> Finally, it has been recommended that Washington must create “a new multilateral forum on Gulf security issues that includes the GCC countries, the US, China, the EU, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, and Russia.”<sup>67</sup>

Given this rationale, Asia could be part of any future peace initiative in the region in at least two ways. First, by becoming a part of the region’s security architecture it could help create a level playing field and contribute to easing tension between the principal adversaries in the Gulf. This would also add muscle to its diplomatic channels to mediate as an honest peace broker. This stems from the fact that unlike the US, Asia is an equidistant partner of both the GCC countries and Iran. Second, after archrivals India and Pakistan became members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran got on board in 2021, one or two GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia which recently became a dialogue partner, could be the next full members. This could encourage diplomacy and peace in the region.

Finally, it is crucial to note that in the current scenario,

a traditional, realist, balance of power concept is outdated because the nature of the competition between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran is not in direct competition but through proxy engagement in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq ... Winners and losers in this rivalry will be determined more by coalitional and hybrid warfare capabilities.

Thus, “collective security and regional stability should be the endgames.”<sup>68</sup>

The changing dynamics was evident in the 2019 international maritime coalition to protect oil shipping in the region’s waters. In addition to some of the GCC countries, India, China, South Korea, the US, and Britain, among others, deployed

ships to protect their interests, which could be a precursor to the envisaged collective security system.

This, however, does not suggest that it is the end of the road for Washington in the region's security scenario. On the contrary, the GCC countries would feel more secure if new security arrangements include the US rather than being under the umbrella of just Asian powers, which maintain good ties with Iran. The better long-term alternative for the Gulf might, therefore, be a collective security architecture.

The world was on a geopolitical reset mode over the last two decades. The fallout of COVID-19 is likely to hasten or retard this process, but is unlikely to reverse it. While Asia is likely to continue its march forward, the West could use this opportunity to reinvent itself and work its way out of the woods. There could be changes that undermine international institutions, reinforce nationalism, and spur de-globalization, but only just. It is more likely that the reverse could happen. Despite rhetoric signaling competition and confrontation, cooperation may reign in a more multipolar world than it is today.

In this milieu, 'to hedge' or 'not to hedge' is not the question on the minds of the Gulf countries. Even 'when to hedge' is not an issue because the process is already under way. How far should the hedging strategy go is the question that preoccupied the policymakers in the Gulf. This discussion will occupy center stage in a post-COVID-19 multipolar world.

The Gulf foreign policies are already resembling those of their Asian counterparts in challenging allies when required, without adversely affecting their strategic cooperation. This was evident in Saudi Arabia willing to allow an oil price slump to capture its desired market share even if it meant upsetting the US and Russia. Similarly, the UAE sent humanitarian aid to Iran during the COVID-19 crisis despite the US choosing not to provide relief to the sanctions-hit country. In August 2021, Saudi Arabia signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia, which is bound to increase its strategic autonomy.

Amid the push for multipolarity, Amitav Acharya describes 'multiplexity' a world that not only has multiple powerful countries but also "international and regional institutions, corporations, transnational nongovernmental organisations, social movements, transnational criminal and terrorist groups, and so on." Thus "a multiplex world is like a multiplex cinema – one that gives its audience a choice of various movies." Accordingly, it is "multiple and complex ... a world of interconnectedness and interdependence," hence multiplex!<sup>69</sup>

While the US has failed to deliver peace in the Gulf, Asia – either through the effort of individual countries or through a collective effort involving an assortment of powers – could attempt to be a unifier. This would contribute to developing an alternate regional security mechanism. Instead of 'maximum pressure,' Asia or Eurasia could insist on maximum diplomacy. This could be the start of a non-US-centric system that includes the US. As the US has gone "from leading everywhere, to leading nowhere,"<sup>70</sup> such a shift fits with John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's call for an offshore balancing strategy, which enables Washington to adapt to its relative decline by avoiding large military deployment abroad,<sup>71</sup> especially after the Afghanistan fiasco.

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