



Reinvigorating Japan-GCC State Ties: The Case for Enhancing Top-Level Diplomacy

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Image caption: Japan's Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya attends the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Foreign Ministers meeting in Kuwait City on September 1, 2025. (Photo by YASSER AL-ZAYYAT / AFP)

Since the turn of the millennium, the politico-economic nexus between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and East Asia has significantly grown. Japan's relations with the GCC states are no exception. This was exemplified by the second Japan-GCC Foreign Ministers' Meeting that took place in early September 2025, and the resumption of talks for a Japan-GCC Economic Partnership Agreementⁱ (EPA) in December 2024.¹ Yet, despite these milestones, there has been little discussion on how Tokyo's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Gulf has shifted (or remained consistent) under different prime ministers.

Note: This policy note was completed by the author in August 2025 and therefore preceded the resignation of Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba as President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September.

i. There is a discrepancy between the Japanese government and the GCC secretariat regarding the terminology around the agreement currently under negotiation. The Japanese government, eager to pursue a comprehensive agreement that goes beyond the limited scope of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), prefers to describe it as an Economic Partnership Agreement. In contrast, the GCC secretariat favors the term FTA due to its familiarity.



From Abe to Ishiba: Japan's Consistent Foreign Policy Orientations

First, Tokyo views the Gulf states as major oil suppliers, crucial to safeguarding Japan's energy security. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has explicitly highlighted the Gulf's critical importance to Japan's energy security in its policy documents.² In the fiscal year of 2022 alone, GCC oil accounted for 94.8 percent of Japan's oil imports.³ With oil

Second, Tokyo has consistently favored the development of comprehensive ties with the Gulf ⁱⁱ that go beyond hydrocarbons. As a result, traditionally transactional relationships, primarily based on the quid pro quo exchange of Gulf oil and Japanese technology, gradually morphed into what Tokyo refers to as “comprehensive partnerships” rooted in cooperation across domains including politics, security, economics, culture and education.⁶ This signals Tokyo’s strategic efforts and commitment to elevate Japan’s relationship with the GCC states from transactional ties to strategic cooperation. To that end, Tokyo has launched multiple bilateral dialogue frameworks with the Gulf states in recent years, including strategic dialogues between foreign ministers with Saudi Arabia (2023)⁷ and Qatar (2021)⁸ and military-to-military dialogues with Qatar (2023)⁹ and Oman (2023),¹⁰ among others.

Third, Tokyo has increasingly come to recognize the current “Arab Gulf moment”¹² which refers to the expansion of the GCC states’ political and economic power in regional and global affairs, including in the Global South. Tokyo no longer views the GCC states merely as energy providers. Rather, it acknowledges Saudi Arabia’s growing influence in OPEC and the G20; Qatar’s mediation efforts including in the war in Gaza and in the U.S.–Taliban peace talks; and Oman’s facilitation of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹³ Japan has also directly benefited from the Gulf states’ influence. For instance, during the 2021 Afghanistan crisis, the Qatari government aided

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Japan's evacuation plan, carrying Japanese citizens and Afghan nationals affiliated with Japanese organizations from Kabul to Japan.

Japan's consistent foreign policy orientations can arguably be partially attributed to the bottom-up nature of foreign policymaking in Tokyo. Policies are often drafted by government officials and channeled upwards for approval along bureaucratic decision-making lines. At the macro level, changes in the prime minister therefore do not always result in major shifts in Tokyo's overall foreign policy directions. That said, Japan's diplomatic engagement vis-à-vis the GCC states has varied in degree under each prime minister.

Varying Degrees of Diplomatic Engagement

At the level of the prime minister, Tokyo's momentum to build and consolidate ties with GCC state leaders peaked during Abe's second term. The number of official visits by the prime minister to the Gulf is a useful measure of this momentum and the region's importance in the eyes of Japanese officials.

Known for his proactive diplomacy, Abe made five official visits to the region during his second term, visiting all six GCC member states: the UAE three times; Saudi Arabia and Oman twice each; and Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain once each.¹⁴ During these visits, he held summit meetings with Gulf leaders, fostered strong bonds, and announced the bilateral cooperation framework of "comprehensive partnerships,"ⁱⁱⁱ which came to set the overall direction of bilateral interactions between Japan and the respective GCC states.

Abe's strong personal ties with the GCC state leaders, harnessed through these visits, proved to be beneficial for safeguarding Japan's energy security. For instance, when the Gulf region saw mounting political tensions between Iran and the GCC states following attacks

on oil tankers in 2019 (during which Japan-affiliated tankers were attacked), Abe himself flew to the Gulf in early 2020 to engage in mediation.¹⁵ Additionally, when Tokyo decided to deploy the Japan Self-Defense Forces to the Gulf of Oman, and the northern part of the Arabian Sea, Abe convinced Gulf leaders that Japan's purpose was not to militarily intimidate but merely to gather the intelligence necessary to safeguard the uninterrupted navigation of oil tankers linked with Japan.¹⁶ Abe's persuasiveness^{iv} effectively avoided GCC state leaders misinterpreting Tokyo's actions in the region.

Abe's successor Yoshihide Suga, who was in office from 2020 to 2021, did not necessarily assume Abe's proactive diplomatic style towards the Gulf. During his tenure, Suga was preoccupied with managing the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing predominantly on domestic issues and subsequently paying limited attention to the GCC states. The tide turned slightly in 2021 when Fumio Kishida assumed the role of prime minister.

As a former foreign minister, Kishida strove to maintain the momentum that Abe created, albeit with less rigor than his predecessor. He made an official visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar alongside a business delegation in July 2023, followed by another visit to the UAE to participate in the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) climate conference later that year. During the first visit, Kishida agreed with his GCC counterparts to advance the existing bilateral partnerships (i.e., the comprehensive partnerships) that Abe initiated.¹⁷ The visit also led to the signing of multiple agreements to bolster bilateral cooperation across various sectors.

The incumbent Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba took office in October 2024. Formerly having served as Defense Minister (2007–2008) and Director-General of that ministry's precursor, the Japan Defense Agency (2002–2004). Ishiba is widely regarded in

iii. The names of Japan's comprehensive partnerships with each GCC state vary (e.g. Saudi-Japan Vision 2030, Japan-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative, Japan-Bahrain Comprehensive Partnership). Yet, they all share a clear policy objective: the development of multisectoral cooperation beyond hydrocarbons.

iv. The three foreign ministers who served during Abe's second term—Fumio Kishida, Taro Kono, and Toshimitsu Motegi—also recognized the GCC states' strategic importance to Japan and actively engaged with them.

Japan for his unique expertise in security and defense. In his parliamentary policy speech in November 2024, he emphasized the importance of strengthening Japan's national security and defense capabilities as well as engaging in top-level diplomacy.¹⁸

He stressed that he would endeavor to achieve this through existing national security frameworks such as "the National Security Strategy of Japan," which explicitly acknowledges the importance of "advancing ties with resource-rich countries" including the GCC states.¹⁹ Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya recently visited Saudi Arabia in May 2025 and agreed with his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud and GCC Secretary-General Jassem Al-Budaiwi to advance bilateral cooperation.²⁰ At the time of writing, Prime Minister Ishiba has yet to visit any GCC state as prime minister. Nevertheless, building and consolidating strong ties with GCC state leaders at an early stage of Prime Minister Ishiba's tenure would be crucial to strengthening Japan-GCC state relations, and by extension secure Japan's energy supplies.

A Way Forward

It would be beneficial for the Ishiba administration—as well as for its successors—to build and consolidate ties with the Gulf leaders. This may be achieved, for example, by making official visits to the GCC states and directly exchanging views with GCC state leaders. Foreign Minister Iwaya's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2025 marked an important step forward, but official visits by Prime Minister Ishiba himself would constitute a more effective approach towards this goal, for several reasons.

First, decision-making structures in the Gulf are largely top-down, particularly when it concerns national security matters like oil trade and diplomacy. As GCC state leaders considerably influence their countries' key policies, establishing direct, high-level communication lines with them serves to facilitate effective diplomatic engagement and coordination between both Japan and the Gulf. This kind of engagement is imperative to safeguard

the stable inflow of Gulf oil into Japan and secure the lives of Japanese nationals in the Gulf region, and beyond, in times of crisis. Abe's mediation and persuasive diplomacy in the aftermath of the 2019 attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf region, and the Qatari government's offer to assist Tokyo's Afghan evacuation mission in 2021, provide clear evidence of the benefits of such cooperation.

Second, heads of state in the Gulf tend to remain in power for several decades, making the development of interpersonal relationships a particularly effective strategy. Additionally, face-to-face communication is typically highly valued in the Gulf states. Increasing visits by heads of government is therefore conducive to strengthened relationship-building with GCC state leaders.

Third, visits by heads of government tend to incentivize both sides to advance bilateral relations in a tangible and multifaceted manner. For instance, Abe's visits to the GCC states led to the formal, joint announcement of Japan's comprehensive partnership framework with these states in the 2010s, which in turn led to the diversification of their bilateral ties. Kishida's 2023 visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar also saw the signing of numerous Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) on a range of areas from semiconductors and space to healthcare and tourism, all aimed at enhancing joint cooperation.²¹ Japanese technology and expertise in non-hydrocarbon domains will be integral to the Gulf states' domestic economic diversification efforts.

The Ishiba administration could build on existing frameworks for bilateral cooperation and dialogue (e.g. comprehensive partnerships, foreign ministers' strategic dialogues, military-to-military dialogues, university chairs and various MoUs) to advance bilateral collaboration in diverse sectors including politics, security, economics, technology, culture, education and research, thereby strengthening Japan's ties with the GCC states.²²

Fourth, the Gulf states' growing politico-economic influence and leadership in regional and international spheres, including the Global South, cannot be overlooked. Their active diplomatic engagement in peacebuilding (e.g., Gaza and Afghanistan) and alignment choices (e.g., the Abraham Accords, I2U2 and the "Look East" policy towards East Asia) make them pivotal state actors when it comes to maintaining Japan's footprint in the Middle East and beyond.

This is particularly true considering escalating external power competition in the Gulf. This includes competition between Japan, South Korea, and China for greater politico-economic influence in the region.^v Japan cannot afford to lose ground to its rivals, mainly South Korea and China, as long as its energy security is closely linked to the GCC states.²³ This underlying external power dynamic in the Gulf adds further strategic justification and urgency for Prime Minister Ishiba's official visit to these states.

Conclusion

Tokyo's consistent foreign policy orientations have advanced Japan-GCC state relations under Japan's four most recent prime ministers. However, the Ishiba administration has compelling reasons to restore and accelerate the momentum achieved by Abe. Official visits by Prime Minister Ishiba to the Gulf states at an early stage in his term would strengthen and consolidate ties between the Japanese prime minister and GCC state leaders, enhancing Japan's relations with the Gulf in general and bolstering Japan's energy security in particular.

GCC states can also benefit from strengthening Japan-GCC state ties. Domestically, the enhanced inflow of Japanese technologies, expertise, and human resources in diverse non-hydrocarbon sectors would fuel domestic economic diversification efforts. Externally, Japan represents a strategically convenient partner. Enhancing bilateral ties with Japan, a key U.S. ally, carries minimal risk for the Gulf states' security relations with Washington.

Whether Prime Minister Ishiba can make an official visit to these states during his tenure depends on various factors. Admittedly, it is not common for a newly appointed Japanese prime minister to choose the GCC states as the first destination for official visits. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. For example, Abe visited Saudi Arabia and the UAE in April 2013, just four months after returning to prime minister's office in December 2012.

The Ishiba administration's stability and longevity could also determine whether Prime Minister Ishiba will be able to pay an official visit to the Gulf during his premiership. At the time of writing, he faces pressure from several members of parliament to resign as prime minister, due partially to the heavy defeat that the Liberal Democratic Party suffered during the upper-house elections in July 2025. Yet even if Prime Minister Ishiba leaves the prime minister's office in the near future, his successors will have similarly compelling reasons to engage closely with GCC state leaders to reinvigorate Japan-GCC state ties through top-level diplomacy.

v. South Korea and China's high-level diplomacy towards the GCC state leaders has included former South Korean President Yoon's visit to the GCC states in 2023 and the ASEAN-GCC-China forum this May.

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