



Post-War Dynamics: The Gulf at the Center of a New World Order

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Wars do not end when military operations cease. Rather, they give rise to a far more complex phase in which security, political, and economic repercussions accumulate, reshaping regional and international structures. History offers ample evidence of this: the Versailles system that followed the First World War drew the map of the entire twentieth century, and the Yalta Conference laid the foundations for a bipolar order that endured for half a century. The Gulf case is no exception to this historical pattern.

In the current context, the conclusion of any major regional confrontation—particularly one in which the interests of Iran, Israel, and the United States are deeply intertwined—will not restore the regional system to its prior configuration. Instead, it will establish an altered reality demanding a fundamental reassessment of strategic options. This is what Robert Jervis termed the “restructuring of expectations” in the aftermath of major crises, wherein security calculations shift, alliance patterns transform, and the rules of both the regional and international game are rewritten.¹

This policy note argues that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states must reposition themselves strategically in the post-conflict phase, transitioning from passively adapting to international transformations to actively influencing their trajectory.

The Diversification of Threat Sources and the End of Security Unilateralism

Historically, Iran has constituted the primary axis of Gulf security calculations, serving as the principal driver of Gulf alliance formation strategies.² Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Gulf security doctrine revolved around containing the Iranian threat in its military, ideological, and sectarian dimensions—a reality reflected in the establishment of the GCC itself in 1981 as a collective security framework.

However, recent conflict dynamics have exposed a fundamental inadequacy in this unilateral approach. Escalation no longer emanates from a single source; it may arise from unexpected intersections among multiple regional and international actors. Israeli military operations in Gaza and Lebanon, the exchange of strikes between Israel and Iran, and tensions in the Red Sea have all demonstrated that the region’s conflict lines are far more complex and interwoven than traditional binaries suggest.

This creates an urgent need for an approach that does not target any single actor but seeks to manage risks emanating from the full spectrum of active regional powers, including both Iran and Israel. It rests upon three integrated pillars: comprehensive deterrence, preventive diplomatic engagement, and the development of autonomous capabilities.³

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Redefining Deterrence in the Post-Conflict Phase

The concept of deterrence in the post-war environment can no longer be reduced to its conventional military dimension. In the Gulf, this reality is particularly acute. The 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facility at Abqaiq demonstrated that sophisticated air defense systems alone are insufficient to protect critical infrastructure. The region is also becoming increasingly vulnerable to escalating cyberattacks on critical sectors including energy, telecommunications, and water.⁴

The comprehensive deterrence required in the post-conflict phase encompasses three interconnected dimensions:

First, cyber and technological deterrence: Strengthening both defensive and offensive cyberspace capabilities has become an urgent priority. This is reflected in accelerating Gulf investments in the cyber domain, including the establishment of dedicated national cybersecurity authorities across all six GCC states, alongside the development of indigenous capabilities in defensive artificial intelligence and advanced encryption technologies.⁵ The protection of energy networks, water desalination systems, and telecommunications infrastructure has become a strategic red line, as their compromise threatens not only national security but the very continuity of civilian life in states wholly dependent on desalination, climate control, and digital infrastructure.

Second, the diversification of defense partnerships: This dimension requires transitioning from near-exclusive reliance on the American military system to a diversified defense portfolio, aimed at reducing the U.S. monopoly on Gulf security. In recent years, Gulf states have taken tangible steps in this direction: from arms deals with France, the United Kingdom, and South Korea, to growing military cooperation with Türkiye, and arms discussions with Russia and China. The objective is not to dispense with the American partnership, but to ensure it does not become a monopoly that constrains the strategic freedom of maneuver.

Third, preventive diplomatic engagement: This dimension presupposes maintaining open channels of communication with all parties. This was practically embodied in the Saudi-Iran deal brokered by Beijing in March 2023, and in Qatar's and Oman's multiple mediations in sensitive regional files. The success of these channels in de-escalating tensions demonstrates that preventive diplomacy is not a luxury but a form of deterrence in its own right.

Re-Engineering the Relationship with the United States

The relationship with Washington represents the most sensitive and complex axis in the recalibration of Gulf strategic calculations. This relationship, whose roots trace back to 1945, has constituted the backbone of Gulf security for eight decades. Yet cumulative shifts—from Obama's doctrine of "leading from behind" to the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, to the limited response to the Aramco attacks to tensions over OPEC+ policies—have generated existential questions about the reliability of American security guarantees.

For the Gulf states, the war has underscored a structural contradiction between America's commitment to Israel's security and its commitment to its Gulf partners. When Washington is compelled to choose between these two commitments at critical moments of escalation, the disparity in priorities becomes unmistakable. This does not mean that disengagement from the American system is a realistic or desirable option. The depth of military, economic, and intelligence entanglement between the two sides makes severance prohibitively costly for both.⁶

What is required—and achievable—is a reformulation of the relationship on more equitable and balanced foundations—a negotiated alliance, in which the junior partner transforms from a passive recipient of policies into an active participant possessing genuine leverage in energy, investment, and geopolitics, enabling it to influence the relationship's outcomes.⁷

Notably, the second Trump administration that took office in January 2025 has reframed the Gulf-U.S. relationship within a new transactional paradigm, linking security guarantees to Gulf economic and investment commitments in the American economy. This development highlights the need for a more discerning Gulf approach to managing this relationship.

A Shared Dilemma Across Regions

The Gulf dilemma should not be read in isolation from its broader international context. It is not a unique case but rather a regional manifestation of a global phenomenon. America's allies in Europe confronted the same dilemma in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, which exposed the fragility of European reliance on the American security umbrella. Macron proposed the concept of "European Strategic Autonomy" as an institutional response to this realization.⁸ In East Asia, countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have adopted a dual hedging strategy, which seeks to preserve security ties with Washington while simultaneously deepening economic integration with Beijing—a delicate balance growing ever more difficult as U.S.-China competition intensifies. This convergence in the responses of Washington's allies across three continents is no coincidence. It reflects a profound structural transformation in the architecture of the international system. This shift concretely marks the transition from a U.S.-led unipolar order, that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, toward a multipolar order, in which power is distributed among multiple centers of gravity and no single party can impose its will unilaterally.⁹ In this context, diversification ceases to be a uniquely Gulf choice and becomes a systematic international pattern adopted by middle and rising powers as the sole rational response to a transforming global environment.

China as a Distinctive Actor in the Gulf Equation

Within this shifting landscape, China's role occupies a pivotal position in the restructuring of Gulf partnerships, yet it differs fundamentally from the U.S. model built on security umbrellas, military bases, and direct defense guarantees. China pursues in the Gulf a model of expanding influence without extending security commitments, concentrating on the economic and technological dimensions and constructing complex networks of mutual dependence without offering explicit security guarantees.¹⁰

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This model has manifested across several parallel tracks: the Belt and Road Initiative, which has channeled substantial investments into Gulf infrastructure; comprehensive strategic partnerships or strategic partnerships with all GCC member states; and the brokering of the Saudi-Iran peace agreement, which represented Beijing's first major diplomatic breakthrough in a region long considered an exclusive domain of American influence. Moreover, as of 2024, Gulf-China bilateral trade overtook Gulf-West bilateral trade, rendering Beijing the primary economic partner for most GCC states—a reality that will shape any future strategic calculations.¹¹

China's model affords Gulf states a wider strategic margin for diversifying their partnerships on a broader scale. India is also gradually transforming into a principal security actor in the Indian Ocean, with direct implications for the security of Gulf maritime corridors. Japan is deepening its technological partnerships with the Gulf states to advance the energy transition. South Korea is emerging as a defense and technology partner of growing significance. And the European Union is seeking to strengthen its economic and political presence in the region. The objective is not to replace one ally with another in a zero-sum game, but to establish a balanced portfolio of partnerships that enables decision-makers to draw on viable alternatives in moments of crisis.

From Adaptation to Influence—The Gulf as an Agent in Shaping the International Order

The deepest challenge goes beyond managing relations with major powers and poses a fundamental question: Can the Gulf states genuinely contribute to shaping the rules of the emergent international order, or will they remain confined to adapting to rules crafted by others? Today, the multiplicity of actors and interaction mechanisms provides historic opportunities for middle powers to transition from rule-takers to rule-makers.¹²

Gulf states possess, in this context, four exceptional assets that distinguish them from many other middle powers:

Financial Weight: Gulf sovereign wealth funds manage assets exceeding \$4 trillion,¹³ a figure that grants them extraordinary leverage in international financial institutions and global capital markets. When the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority or Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund invests in major economies, they are not merely generating financial returns but constructing effective networks of geoeconomic influence.

Strategic Geography: The region controls vital maritime corridors—the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, that are critical to global energy trade through which approximately 30% of the world's seaborne oil trade passes, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. This geographic reality renders Gulf stability a prerequisite for global economic stability and provides its states with a permanent lever of influence immune to the vagaries of political fluctuation.

Diplomatic Capital: Gulf diplomacy has demonstrated increasing effectiveness in complex regional and international affairs. From Doha’s hosting of Taliban negotiations to Oman’s mediations in the Iranian nuclear file, to the Saudi-Iranian agreement brokered by Beijing, a substantial Gulf diplomatic portfolio has accumulated that leverages relative neutrality and financial weight to build international credibility unavailable to partisan powers.¹⁴

Structural Developmental Transformations: Economic diversification visions—such as Saudi Vision 2030, the UAE’s Vision 2031, and Qatar’s National Vision 2030—are fundamentally redefining the region’s identity. The Gulf, known for decades as an oil exporter, is gradually transforming into a global hub for technology, financial services, logistics, tourism, and artificial intelligence. This transformation not only enhances economic resilience but also cements the region’s vital position within global value chains.

Activating these assets requires a greater Gulf role in shaping these transformations.¹⁵ This entails formulating a shared Gulf vision of the desired international order, building coalitions with other middle powers whose interests converge (such as Brazil, South Africa, India, and Türkiye, and taking the initiative in proposing institutional projects within international forums that translate this vision into reality.

Conclusion

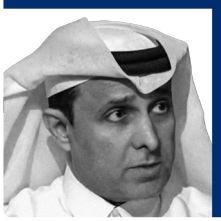
Building a more balanced and stable international order is not a project that can be accomplished at a single summit or through a solitary agreement. It is a long and complex trajectory requiring strategic patience and institutional boldness.¹⁶ Yet the war has exposed the fragility of existing regional and international arrangements—from the fracturing of conventional deterrence systems to the inability of international institutions to contain escalation, from the erosion of security guarantees’ credibility to the exposure of structural contradictions in asymmetric alliances—making this trajectory a strategic necessity rather than an academic exercise.

The vacuums left by the retreat of unipolar hegemony will not remain unfilled for long. Powers that hesitate to fill them will find themselves subject to rules drafted by others in accordance with their own interests. The central question, therefore, is no longer: How do Gulf states avoid the next war? It has become more radical and pressing: How do they contribute to building an international architecture that reduces the probability of its eruption in the first place? The answer to this question will determine not only the future of the Gulf region, but also the shape of the international order for decades to come.¹⁷

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