



The Iran War and an Emerging Geopolitical Order

Khalid Al-Jaber

KEYWORDS

Geopolitical Order, Multipolarity, Leadership Vacuum, Sovereignty, Adaptation, GCC



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

An International System in Transition:

The world is shifting from an international system with known boundaries to a new global order whose rules have yet to be defined. The Iran war has accelerated this transition, but did not cause it.

No Leader Has Emerged:

No major power has demonstrated the political will or legitimacy to lead a coordinated response, pointing to a failure of global governance.

Security is Being Redefined:

National security no longer encompasses military deterrence alone. It also includes supply chains, semiconductors, digital infrastructure, and AI capacity, which have become equally decisive in determining state power and influence.

Gulf States Face a Dilemma:

The Gulf states' energy wealth and geographic centrality grant them considerable negotiating weight in a multipolar order, but these same advantages expose them to disproportionate risks in periods of escalation.

Introduction

The US-Israel-Iran war cannot be viewed as a passing regional crisis or a clash between competing powers in a limited arena, but rather as a pivotal moment in contemporary political history. The world has now entered a phase of historical transition, shifting from an international system with known boundaries to a new global system with no clear features or rules.

The current war, however, is not the sole driver of the global transformation we are witnessing—it has accelerated and exposed shifts that were already underway.

Decline of Post-Cold War Paradigm

Over the three decades that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of bipolarity, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, four core assumptions have shaped the global discourse. The first assumption was the dominance of U.S. leadership over the international order and an acknowledgment of the U.S. position as the sole superpower capable of shaping the rules and imposing new standards.¹

The second was Europe's operation under the American security umbrella through the NATO framework, which provided it with broad latitude to focus on economic integration and progress as well as institutional architecture rather than the burdens of hard security.²

The central question is no longer how to manage crises within a stable systemic framework, but who possesses the capacity to manage the international order itself, and who sets its rules, standards, and mechanisms of enforcement.

The third assumption related to China's economic rise, initially without a direct challenge to the rules of the prevailing order, in line with 'the peaceful rise' formula adopted by Beijing for decades.³

The fourth centered on managing regional crises as isolated, separate cases that did not affect the core of the global balance, so that they could be contained within their geographic boundaries without upsetting the global order.

This paradigm constituted the reference framework that shaped policies, strategies, and academic conceptions throughout what became known as the 'end of history' and the unipolar moment.⁴

But the current war has revealed that this conception is no longer valid for interpreting international reality, predicting its trajectories, or formulating policies. The central question is no longer how to manage crises within a stable systemic framework, but who possesses the capacity to manage the international order itself, and who sets its rules, standards, and mechanisms of enforcement.



Redefining Security

The transformation of the concept of security constitutes one of the most important outcomes of the current war. National security does not mean hard military power and nuclear and conventional deterrent capabilities alone; it has evolved into a compound concept with multiple, overlapping dimensions.⁵ This includes the economic dimension relating to supply chains and finance, the technological dimension tied to semiconductors and advanced communications, the energy dimension concerning the security of supplies and transit corridors, the informational dimension linked to data and digital sovereignty, and finally, the artificial intelligence component, which is decisive for the power equations of the future.⁶

Under this transformed definition, a state capable of protecting its digital networks from cyber intrusions, securing its supply chains against disruption or coercion, and ensuring its technological independence in critical sectors has become more secure than a state possessing abstract military superiority without a solid economic and technological foundation. This transformation shifts the sources of deterrence within the international system, as armies are no longer the sole actors in guaranteeing deterrence and are now joined by strategic factories, advanced research laboratories, major technology corporations, and digital infrastructure, all functioning as central instruments in the modern security equation.⁷

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This changes the map of international power, taking into consideration multidimensional standards that prioritize new capabilities over military arsenals and the size of defense budgets. This suggests that medium-sized military states may, under certain conditions, exercise more influence than bigger powers due to their superiority in a specific sector of compound security.

Europe's Predicament

This comprehensive shift reflects the end of an entire historical phase: the phase of strategic certainty that prevailed in the post-Cold War era. For decades, the world assumed that Western leadership possessed the structural and institutional capacity to regulate international balances and prevent a slide into chaos, and that the Atlantic system, with its American and European wings, constituted a guarantor of global stability and a trusted custodian of the rules of the international game. But the international response to the current crisis has revealed a notable decline in the collective ability to manage major shocks and has exposed the widening gap between discourse and capability.

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Europe has emerged as the clearest model of this structural retreat. The continent, which built its security architecture over decades on American guarantees and on the assumption of the sustainability of Atlantic commitment to its security, suddenly found itself facing an existential question: what happens when the American security umbrella becomes less clear in its commitments, less prepared to bear the costs alone, and more preoccupied with the Pacific priorities and its rivalry with China? ⁸ This is not a tactical question. It forces a fundamental reconsideration of the foundations of contemporary European security and opens the door to intense debates about European strategic autonomy and the development of independent defense capabilities.

This predicament does not affect only the West; it has also affected the rising powers, which are known to benefit most from a declining Western hegemony. China and the major Asian powers, despite their deep dependence on Gulf energy and the close linkage of their economies to the security of energy corridors and freedom of navigation through vital straits, have likewise been unable to offer an integrated strategic vision to safeguard the region's stability or guarantee the security of global energy flows. China, which imported roughly 42% of its oil from the Gulf region before the war, has largely approached the crisis through a pragmatic economic lens, avoiding direct security engagement and relying on stability provided by existing security arrangements.⁹

All major powers are harmed by the crisis, economically and strategically, yet none possesses the political will, operational capacity, or international legitimacy to lead a decisive, coordinated international response.

This collective incapacity reveals a deep structural paradox in the current international order: all major powers are harmed by the crisis, economically and strategically, yet none possesses the political will, operational capacity, or international legitimacy to lead a decisive, coordinated international response. This means that what the world faces is not a crisis of power in the sense of a shortage of capabilities, but a crisis of global leadership in translating available capabilities into effective international action. Traditional international institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council, have struggled to reach consensus on the conflict, while alliances appear increasingly fragmented.¹⁰

The Gulf Dilemma

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are at the center of this transformation, as critical suppliers of global energy, and as pivotal actors in the international balance of power. Their substantial share of global oil and gas reserves, along with their control over critical maritime corridors, has given them strategic weight far exceeding their geographic size and population.¹¹ Yet this position has created a dilemma, where their geographic advantage becomes a strategic burden in moments of escalation such as this one.

The threat to the Strait of Hormuz or the disruption of maritime navigation in vital waterways is no longer a regional matter that can be contained within its geographic boundaries. It has become a direct test for the international order to protect the global economy and ensure the continuity of goods and energy flows.¹² The disruption of navigation and the rise in the costs of energy, maritime insurance, and shipping during the current crisis exposed the fragility of a global economy still heavily dependent on a small number of maritime chokepoints, even as alternative corridors have been activated. This fragility grants the Gulf states increasing negotiating weight, but it also burdens them with exceptional responsibilities and risks.

Fragility of Globalization

In response to the war, the major powers moved in different directions rather than following a coherent strategic vision that addressed their shared risks. The direct result was rising costs, with energy markets destabilized by sharp volatility, supply chain disruptions, and a decline in confidence in the rules of global trade and in freedom of navigation, which had constituted the very foundation of globalization over the past decades.¹³

This fragility grants the Gulf states increasing negotiating weight, but it also burdens them with exceptional responsibilities and risks.

These outcomes raise fundamental questions about the sustainability of the prevailing globalization model and its capacity to withstand major geopolitical shocks. Globalization now finds itself facing an existential threat that is reshaping its founding logic and is pushing states toward policies of reshoring and defensive diversification. The ‘friend-shoring’ and ‘selective decoupling’ suggest that globalization may be entering a more fragmented phase.¹⁴

Toward a Multipolar Order

The international order is not facing a total collapse, but rather a gradual transformation into a condition that may be described as ‘unstable stability’ or ‘fragile equilibrium.’ The world is not heading toward a comprehensive Hobbesian chaos, in which rules are entirely absent, nor is it returning to a unipolar order led by a single hegemonic power, as prevailed in the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium. What is gradually taking shape is a multipolar competitive order in which major powers share influence and responsibilities without any one of them possessing the capacity to impose full hegemony or craft rules binding on all.¹⁵

Within the framework of this emerging order, alliances become more flexible, less stable, and more pragmatic, and deterrence becomes more costly and more difficult to calculate due to the multiplicity and entanglement of threat sources. Equally important, economics and technology are advancing faster than traditional military power as central instruments for



exerting international influence and advancing strategic interests.¹⁶ As a result, the new order has to be fluid and shifting, making it difficult to predict its outcomes or chart its course. These characteristics impose on international actors the need to develop advanced adaptive capacities and high strategic flexibility.

Navigating the Transition

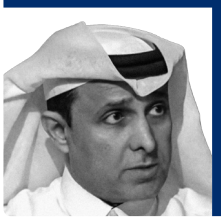
The central issue is what kind of international order will emerge in the aftermath of this war, and what standards will govern its new phase. Major transformations do not occur when one state defeats another, but when the rules of power themselves change, along with the standards of legitimacy and the sources of influence within the international system.

The emerging global order has no clear center. Strategic adaptation, including the capacity to realign resources, partnerships, and doctrine in response to shifting power dynamics, is increasingly the decisive variable in determining state influence, replacing traditional measures of military size and historical standing.

States that develop early-warning capacity for structural shifts, diversify their strategic partnerships, and invest in the security dimensions outlined above will be better positioned to navigate this transition. For Gulf states, positioned at the intersection of energy, geography, and competing major power interests, managing this shift is both an immediate strategic priority and a challenge.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khalid Al-Jaber

Khalid Al-Jaber is the Executive Director of the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. He is a distinguished scholar and practitioner specializing in political communication and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) affairs. Al Jaber has held prominent leadership positions, including Director of Al-Sharq Studies & Research Center and Editor-in-Chief of The Peninsula, Qatar's leading English-language daily newspaper. He also served as an Assistant Professor of Political Communication in the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University, where he made significant contributions to the academic and policy discourse on regional and international issues. Al-Jaber's research focuses on the Gulf and MENA region, with expertise spanning political science, public diplomacy, international communications, and international relations. He is the author and editor of several books and numerous scholarly articles. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Leicester, a Master's degree from the University of West Florida, and postgraduate diplomas from Fordham University, Stanford University, and Georgetown University.

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Burj Al Mana 3rd floor, Street 850, Zone 60, Doha, Qatar
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