

THE GULF: DRAGON ON THE PROWL

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The geopolitical sands are shifting in the Persian Gulf. Investments in critical infrastructure allow Beijing to project power, reap financial rewards, secure resources, expand markets, acquire strategically-located bases, and undermine America's security alliances. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further brought into sharp focus simmering tensions and stresses and strains. Economic diversification, strategic hedging, pragmatism and "Look East" are the buzzwords. The Gulf sheikhdoms are on the cusp of history where choices made today will shape their future. Washington can no longer expect a monogamous relationship in a region ripe for polygamy with multiple suitors. Nonetheless, this paper argues that the logic of geopolitics dictates that China's expansionist moves would prevent America's retreat because the success of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is linked to maintaining its presence in the resource-rich Gulf, and not letting China dominate it. Besides, when the chips are down, nearly all Gulf states still "Look West" for security against regional threats.

The geopolitical sands are shifting in the Persian Gulf. Several regional and extra-regional great powers—often with conflicting agendas and rival alignments—are jostling for influence and spreading their wings amidst religious and geopolitical fault lines, dwindling American interest, economic rebalancing and shifts in global energy trade. America's energy self-sufficiency thanks to the shale gas revolution, the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, and the strategic pivot from the Middle East to the Pacific have raised doubts about Washington's role as security guarantor and led to cultivation of ties with China, Russia, and India by America's long-standing Gulf allies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further brought into sharp focus simmering tensions and stresses and strains. The Gulf sheikhdoms are on the cusp of history where choices made today will shape their future.

Over the past decade, China has significantly expanded its presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in general and in the oil-rich Persian Gulf in particular. The visit to China in January 2022 by the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) secretary general to discuss energy and infrastructure cooperation prompted talk of a "new era in Chinese-Middle East relations," and "a shift in focus from trade and economics to geopolitics."¹ Beijing sees an expanded economic and strategic footprint in the Gulf as critical towards alleviating some of its own vulnerabilities and fulfilling its ambition to be a global superpower on par with the United States. Historically, every major industrializing power's ascension to global leadership is powered by overseas expansion—in the quest for resources, markets and bases. China is no exception.

Economics is Strategy

China's insatiable appetite for natural resources and minerals requires Beijing to pursue ambitious strategic goals. China is the world's largest energy importer, and 40 percent of its oil comes from the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Oman are the top three oil exporters to China. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined a 1+2+3 (energy plus construction and infrastructure, trade and investment plus nuclear, aerospace, and new energy sources) framework for Sino-Arab cooperation. Since 2005, China has made roughly \$101 billion investments in the Gulf countries—mainly in ports, railroads, telecom, refineries and power plants, nearly 42 percent of China's total investments in the greater Middle East.² Saudi Arabia (\$39.9 billion) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (\$34.7 billion) are the largest recipients of Chinese investment (followed by Egypt, Algeria, Iran, and Iraq). On top of a 20-year "oil-for-reconstruction" agreement with Iraq, the conclusion of a 25-year \$400 billion "oil-for-security-and-growth" pact with Iran is another shot in the arm. Beijing's oil imports from Iran and investments in its infrastructure and petrochemical capacity have undermined the impact of American sanctions. China is the only great power that enjoys close ties with *all* major oil-producing countries. Beijing often goes out of its way to court regimes that Washington spurns or sanctions.

Along with resources, China seeks new markets to absorb its excess industrial capacity. The past decade has seen a tenfold increase in China's trade volume worth \$239.8 billion with the Middle East. In 2020, China displaced the European Union (EU) as the GCC's top trading partner, their biggest

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oil buyer, and a major source of investments, thereby yielding significant political dividends. In 2021, trade between China and the Gulf states exceeded \$200 billion for the first time. Decline in Saudi-U.S. trade has been accompanied by a huge jump in Saudi-Chinese bilateral trade from \$3.1 billion in 2000 to \$67.1 billion in 2020. Beijing is pushing for a free trade agreement with the GCC in order to gain even greater access to their markets for its products. Indeed, with its burgeoning young population, investment-friendly environment and geostrategic location, the MENA region and China seem like a perfect fit for economic growth for several decades. Says Saeed Ghasseminejad: "The picture is clear: Chinese and Persian Gulf economies are becoming more integrated, while regional and U.S. economic interests are on diverging paths."³

Some of America's traditional Gulf allies worry about the repercussions of possible U.S. retrenchment, if not retreat.⁴ The energy alliance with Russia since 2016, one of the world's top oil producers, has not only enhanced OPEC's (Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries) power but also brought the Saudis and Emiratis closer to Moscow.⁵ In OPEC+, Russia collaborates with major energy producers like Saudi Arabia to regulate oil supply, and thereby oil prices. Fluctuating oil prices and demand coupled with the looming global energy transition necessitated by climate change cause unease. Only China and India will continue to see an increase in oil demand to 2050. Bahrain and Oman look to the future with trepidation as their oil reserves may not last beyond 10-15 years.⁶ Against this backdrop, economic diversification, strategic hedging, pragmatism and "Look East" are the buzzwords.⁷ The oil sector, port development and knowledge economy are major employment boosters for the future. Saudi Aramco and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) have recently signed multi-billion dollar deals with China's state-owned oil and gas companies. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman—the region's largest economies—are seeking foreign investment to pursue ambitious port development projects as part of their economic diversification plans to restructure their economies away from a reliance on oil. These countries hope to leverage China's economic engagement to expand their shipping and logistics capacity in the Gulf and Red Sea/Horn of Africa. Nearly two-thirds of Chinese exports to Europe, the Middle East and Africa pass through Emirati ports.⁸ The growing Chinese footprint has, in turn, prompted India, Japan, and South Korea to pay more attention to the Gulf as well.

Visioning the Future

A crucial artery for global energy, the Gulf sits at a strategic juncture of President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—which entails building land transport and trade corridors and maritime rim port network linking Europe, Asia and Africa—to secure access to resources, markets, and bases. China's mega-infrastructure project aligns well with those of Gulf states' development visions.⁹ Chinese firms are actively participating in several "Vision" development plans such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Qatar's National Vision 2030, the New Kuwait 2035, Oman's Vision 2020, and the UAE 2030 Strategy. In particular, the BRI's "port-industrial park-city" development model dovetails with the Gulf countries' port and urban expansion plans. So, China figures prominently in the Gulf countries' economic and strategic calculus, keen as they are to tap into Chinese oil and construction firms, technologies (artificial intelligence (AI), big data, biogenics) as well as military hardware, healthcare and renewable energy.¹⁰ Chinese companies such as Huawei are building 5G digital networks in GCC countries. The sale of AI technology to the Gulf countries, which lies at the heart of "Smart and Safe Cities," is estimated to be upwards of \$320 billion by 2030.¹¹ Furthermore, China's arms sales are flourishing as Beijing presents itself as an alternative supplier without any end-user conditions.

Unlike other regions, Beijing has not faced any backlash over the economic downturn caused by its mishandling of the COVID-19 virus. If anything, the pandemic has further consolidated the GCC-China relations through the timely provision of vaccines, expertise, and equipment. The UAE partnered with Chinese companies to produce and market Chinese-made coronavirus vaccines. Beijing has reportedly distributed vaccine doses to 17 countries in the Middle East, and signed deals for Sinopharm vaccine production in the UAE and Egypt to cater to regional needs.¹² Many cutting edge Chinese technology companies (e.g., SenseTime that is blacklisted in the West over Uighurs' rights abuses) are being welcomed by the Gulf countries keen to enhance their standing as tech and financial hubs.

More importantly, China's top-down governance model of speedy decision-making and fast delivery unconstrained by bureaucratic or legal encumbrances resonates well with the Gulf's young and ambitious rulers keen to improve the lot of their people.¹³ Flummoxed by the frequent Mid-East policy changes under successive U.S. administrations, the

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman—the region's largest economies—are seeking foreign investment to pursue ambitious port projects as part of economic diversification plans to restructure their economies away from a reliance on oil.

Gulf leaders appreciate the continuity and consistency in foreign policy afforded by China's authoritarian political system. Through regional institutions, educational exchanges, and public diplomacy, Beijing is also pushing for acceptance of its narrative, norms, and standards. Chinese language has been added to national curricula in most Gulf countries. The Pew Research Center's annual surveys have found that majorities in almost all the MENA countries have a favorable view of China.

Interestingly, countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Israel, may disagree on almost everything but agree on a greater role by China. Beijing takes comfort from the fact that long-term U.S. allies endorse China's hardline stance on human rights and political dissent, including on the Xinjiang issue. Some Gulf states' desire to wean China away from Iran also plays a part. (Iran and China have long been partners in resisting or constraining the U.S. hegemony.) From China's perspective, having better ties with regional rivals than they have with each other gives Beijing enormous leverage over all of them. Not only nations but even radical extremists from Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan to Shi'a militant groups in Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon all court Beijing to counter the United States.¹⁴

With its expanding overseas interests, investments, and assets, China sees relations with the resource-rich Arab world as the key to unlocking its status as a global power. Beijing offers itself as an alternative economic and security partner to countries that question Washington's development model and are uneasy with its interventionist policies. China's

state-owned companies are playing a “significant role as builders, owners, and operators of terminals and other port infrastructure in the Gulf.”¹⁵ As the U.S. pivots to Asia and the Pacific Ocean, China is clearly pivoting to the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, challenging America’s hitherto unrivalled power position. Washington can no longer insist on exclusive bilateral relationships with its Gulf partners as Beijing comes courting them with bag loads of money, goods, and toys of war.

Much like China, the Gulf countries have also benefited from and are heavily invested in globalization. Their post-oil economic diversification strategies, port and urban development plans hinge on networked global economy, interconnected supply chains, and open arteries of trade and finance. However, as Mohammed Baharoon points out, the Biden administration’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine seriously threatens globally interconnected world order and marks a return to the bipolar world order of the Cold War era.¹⁶ Therefore, Russia’s assault on Ukraine’s sovereignty is as worrisome as the West’s unprecedented weaponization of globalization (via sanctions, asset seizures, and freezing of companies and individuals’ overseas possessions). Both developments impose difficult choices on regional powers that are keen on preserving their freedom to maneuver in an increasingly polarized world.¹⁷ Pressure to choose runs counter to the preferences of the Gulf leaders who want increased trade and investment from China and Russia while keeping U.S. military presence and security guarantees.¹⁸ Wary of being dragged into great power confrontations, the Saudi and Emirati leaders’ reluctance to side with the West against Russia over Ukraine is as much

about exercising autonomy in decision-making as about protecting their oil and strategic ties with Moscow (and Beijing). Of particular concern is setting precedents that they cannot afford to uphold should Beijing one day invade Taiwan, given their heavy dependence on energy exports to China.¹⁹ In a sense, the crisis over Ukraine portends a struggle over the future world order.

American Apprehensions

Washington keeps a close watch on Beijing’s moves in the Gulf to seek relative gains. The Biden administration’s policy documents label China and Russia as America’s two primary threats. Post-Ukraine, a bruised, weakened, and distracted Russia may well be forced to concede even more ground to China in the MENA region. As elsewhere, Chinese economic penetration, multibillion dollar deals, management of critical infrastructure, and cultivation of elites could have the cumulative impact of undermining U.S. primacy. Sure enough, Washington’s missteps in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan have worked to China’s advantage. Stoking conflict may not be in Beijing’s interest but taking advantage of Washington’s blunders remains high on the agenda. China appears to be the biggest beneficiary of the United States’ disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq. Beijing has stepped up its portrayal of the United States as a source of instability, conflicts, and a disruptive force. Official Chinese media contrasts America’s “Middle East fatigue” with China’s vigor and vitality as the next great power and economic partner.²⁰ Chinese strategists credit Beijing’s “partnership diplomacy in the Middle East for dilut[ing] the influence of other great powers, facilitating a multi-polar pattern and...‘soft balancing’ against hegemony.”²¹ China has now become the most important part of the hedging strategy in the Gulf. Jonathan Eyal sums up the “geopolitical sweet spot” China’s finds itself in:

China is seen as a political hedge by everyone. It suits the Iranians to treat China as an ally because they do not have many other options. It suits the Saudis to turn a blind eye to what China is doing with Iran, because the Saudis fear being abandoned by the U.S., so they wish to keep all options open. And it suits Israel to play the friendship game with Beijing, in the hope of taming Chinese support for radical Arab governments...In fact, China has been masterful in its ability to both have its cake and eat it in the Middle East, in deriving maximum benefits from relations with regional countries, while carefully avoiding

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any liabilities. Notwithstanding the latest Chinese treaty with Iran, the bulk of Chinese investments [and missiles] are going to Saudi Arabia, Iran's sworn enemy.²²

As noted earlier, the simmering tensions and fissures in America's relations with its old Gulf allies have resurfaced since Russia invaded Ukraine. The Iran nuclear deal, lack of firm U.S. support for the Saudi/UAE's military intervention in Yemen, the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization, the GCC split over Qatar, the Khashoggi assassination, and reluctance to transfer advanced U.S. weaponry have strained relations. That relations with America were passing through the "stress test" (to quote the UAE Ambassador Yousef Al-Otaiba) became evident when the UAE ignored Washington's pleas and instead joined China (and India) in abstaining from a Security Council resolution condemning the Russia on February 25, 2022, and Saudi Arabia rebuffed U.S. requests to pump more oil to alleviate oil prices which soared above \$120 a barrel.²³ Apparently, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were miffed over what they saw as "double standards" in Washington's swift and robust response to the Ukraine conflict as compared to "feeble, indecisive, and half-baked effort" to defend them against several "Iran-sponsored drone attacks on airports and oil facilities in 2019 and 2022."²⁴ Not only that, notwithstanding its destabilizing effect on world politics, the Ukraine war has filled the Gulf coffers with billions of dollars due to the sharp price hikes.

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a European problem but the rupture in U.S.-Russia/China relations means that their economic links with Washington's rivals will be subjected to close scrutiny to ensure compliance with sanctions. For, both Beijing and Moscow want to upend the U.S.-dominated world order. China's financial institutions with a robust presence in the Gulf are edging towards the de-Dollarization of trade and use of Chinese Yuan for financial transactions, thus laying the groundwork for internationalization of its currency. The decision by some central banks in Middle East to hold part of their reserves in Chinese Yuan-denominated assets is also aimed at countering the threat of U.S. sanctions. *The Wall Street Journal* reported recently that Beijing is coaxing Riyadh into a "Yuan-for-oil" arrangement which would dent the Dollar's dominance of the oil market, create a parallel system for international payments, contribute to decline of the Dollar's reserve status and help China offer the Yuan as a trading currency to U.S. adversaries such as Russia and Iran.²⁵ In addition, China's mercantilist and transactional approach generates concerns about Beijing using infrastructure projects to trap vulnerable countries into debt dependency, and thereby increasing Beijing's leverage to shape their choices in its favor.²⁶

Beijing's growing economic ties with the MENA extend to military cooperation. China's inroads into the Gulf's security sphere via arms sales, counterterrorism, missiles, nuclear, and surveillance technology have set off alarms in Washington. In November 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that a suspected Chinese military base under construction in Khalifa Port was shut down after pressure from the U.S., although UAE officials insisted that it had no military purpose.²⁷ This coincided with the breakdown in negotiations over the F-35 sale and the subsequent UAE decision to purchase 80 upgraded French Rafale jets and helicopters and a South Korean air defense system (based on a Russian design) in January 2022.²⁸ Apparently, the Biden administration's concerns over China's military activities cast a shadow over the \$23-billion deal of advanced U.S. weaponry (comprising F-35 fighter aircraft, Reaper drones and advanced munitions) to the UAE approved by the outgoing Trump administration in January 2020.²⁹

The U.S.-China competition is thus manifesting itself in the arms market. Though China is still far behind the United States, signs of the Gulf states-China military cooperation are evident in combat UAVs, cyber, and missiles, training, port calls and joint exercises.³⁰ The Gulf states may

possess advanced air forces, but they are still vulnerable to missiles, drone and cyber-attacks. And China has carved out a niche in drones and missiles, taking advantage of Washington's reluctance to sell such weapons to its Gulf partners. China has been selling drones to the UAE and the HQ-17AE air defense system to Saudi Arabia. Reports suggest that between 2016 and 2020, China's arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE increased by 386 percent and 169 percent, respectively, compared to the previous five years. After selling ballistic missiles to Riyadh, Beijing has begun assisting them with their production inside Saudi Arabia since 2019. China has also armed Qatar with the SY-400 short-range ballistic missile system and has emerged as one of the five largest arms-suppliers to Qatar during 2000-19.³¹ More importantly, some Gulf countries seek to benefit from advances in Chinese military R&D to boost their own defense industry with weapons co-production agreements. For example, Saudi Arabia is aiming to spend 50 percent of its military expenditure on indigenous defense industrial development by 2030.³² In August 2021, Saudi Arabia had also signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia. However, as Russia's weapons stockpile gets depleted in the Ukraine war, Chinese arms sales could see a quantum jump to the MENA region.

In particular, high-tech collaboration in 5G networks and artificial intelligence with U.S.-sanctioned Chinese companies and security cooperation between the Gulf states and China in recent years have proved contentious. The construction of advanced telecommunication networks in locations that host the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is of note. Against the backdrop of escalating interplay of technopolitics, geopolitics, and the battle between Internet and *Chinternet*, the Gulf countries face the classic "development versus security" dilemma over digital infrastructure as Beijing and Washington enter "a race to attract as many states as possible into their respective orbits."³³ The growing tendency to hedge in strategic matters causes unease in Washington.

Apparently, both allies and adversaries of America are being pro-actively courted by Beijing. A well-known China and the Middle-East expert at Zayed University, Jonathan Fulton, is convinced that China is trying to create a wedge between the U.S. and its Gulf allies.³⁴ Over time as China's economic and strategic ties grow, Washington is likely to face a well-entrenched Beijing as part of the Gulf strategic landscape.³⁵ No doubt, America's old Gulf allies would like to keep their relations with Washington and Beijing on

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separate parallel tracks hoping they never intersect or cross each other.³⁶ But geopolitics is zero-sum. It imposes tough choices. The GCC states will increasingly find tightrope walking in the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry an arduous task. Instability and insecurity result when small countries' hedging strategy is turned into a wedging strategy by a rival major power to break up alliances.

It's All About the Bases

Chinese strategists regard the current American presence in the Gulf and dominance of critical sea lanes in the Indian Ocean as an obstacle to their global power ambitions. Given China's reliance on energy imports, Beijing's maritime strategy calls for establishing robust naval presence around key strategic chokepoints from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab and the Suez Canal.³⁷ Strategic footholds in the Gulf, therefore, constitute an important part of China's maritime expansion plans for the Indian Ocean to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies.³⁸ Antipiracy operations off Somalia and evacuation of Chinese nationals from the Libyan and Yemeni conflicts demonstrated the Chinese sea/air-lift capability. With the Djibouti base and Gwadar port, Chinese forces are now well positioned in Gulf security affairs. China would obviously like to have presence or bases on both sides of the Hormuz Strait. It is not surprising that Beijing's much-hyped \$400 billion deal with Iran grants the Chinese navy access to the Jask port on the Gulf of Oman.³⁹ Access to

an Iranian port kills two birds with one stone: as a pressure point or leverage to wrest concessions from the Arab GCC states, and simultaneously thwarts India's efforts to develop Iran's Chabahar port to create railroad access to Central Asia. Likewise, China's commercial investments worth tens of billions of dollars in the Duqm port in Oman, Jazan city in Saudi Arabia, and Khalifa Industrial Zone in the UAE *could* potentially serve strategic interests as well.⁴⁰

China's current military footprint may be very modest and no match to the powerful U.S. military in the Gulf. However, China acts in a piecemeal, quiet and patient fashion, making a series of low-level coordinated moves before bringing its pieces together at an opportune time ("when conditions are ripe" to quote former foreign minister Qian Qichen) to throw its rival off-balance. Two recent studies mention Kenya, Tanzania, Djibouti, the UAE, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Cambodia as "focal points" where China is "likely considering planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities."⁴¹ Says Jonathan Fulton: "Its port and industrial park projects in Duqm, Abu Dhabi, and Jazan show the shape of China's future Arabian Peninsula presence, as it is developing a physical presence in key strategic ports, giving it access to the Gulf, the Red Sea, and up to the Mediterranean. As such, we are only going to see a much deeper Chinese presence in the region."⁴² Needless to say, the geostrategic consequences of China's military expansion would negatively impinge upon America's ties with the Gulf countries.⁴³

Armed with the world's largest navy, China aims to be a "resident power" in the Indian Ocean—just like the U.S., the UK and France.⁴⁴ Once China's navy establishes presence on both sides of the Indian Ocean as well as the Hormuz Strait, the establishment of a Western Theater Command will follow. Apparently, Beijing is pursuing a multipronged strategy: establishing alliance-like relations with America's adversaries (Iran); courting old U.S. friends and allies (the GCC six) under the BRI banner; chipping away at American predominance by expanding its maritime footprint, arms sales, port calls, and joint military drills (with Iran, Russia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia); and taking operational control of strategically located seaports.

There is media speculation about China wanting to expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to pull some Gulf Arab countries into its version of NATO to weaken the U.S. alliances.⁴⁵ Poaching a key U.S. ally would

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send a strong signal to others about the waning American power in the Middle East and prompt them to switch allegiance to China. At a minimum, China's goal is to push more U.S. partners towards establishing strategic neutrality so that the West won't be able to ostracize or sanction China, especially in the event of a Ukraine-like conflict in the Pacific.⁴⁶ For Beijing, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides a template of the GCC countries' reaction in any future attempt by China to forcibly occupy Taiwan.

Chinese Checkers

The Middle East may not be the main theater but the Gulf will remain the fulcrum of great power competition. America's Asian allies highly dependent on energy imports fear that any American retrenchment would result in Chinese dominance and jeopardize their secure access to the Gulf's oil and gas resources. Put simply, the more entrenched China is in the Middle East and Africa, the more potent and belligerent it will be in pursuing its strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific. A China under U.S. pressure in the Pacific would also throw its weight behind anti-American forces in the Middle East. Such an outcome would defeat the very objective underlying the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.⁴⁷

Ironic it may seem, America's pull out from the Gulf is thus neither in the interests of its allies nor enemies, *albeit* for entirely different reasons. For better or worse, the success of the FOIP strategy is linked to the resource-rich

Gulf dynamics. As the U.S. finds itself faced with a loosely aligned coalition of six revisionist states—Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and North Korea, Washington is likely to forge more Quad and AUKUS-type coalitions with like-minded states to push back. The West Asian Quad comprising the U.S., India, the UAE, and Israel (also known as “I2U2”) is a case in point. About 46,000 U.S. troops are stationed in the Gulf states, along with some 2,000 British and French troops. China’s rival India has also taken on a greater share of the security burden in the Indian Ocean and forged defense ties with some key GCC members. While China may be the largest Asian investor in the Gulf, Japan, India, and South Korea are not far behind.

So, the logic of geopolitics dictates that China’s expansionist moves would prevent America’s retreat because America’s competition with China now runs through the Gulf. Washington is expected to maintain current force levels in the “Wild West” of world politics both to protect global energy supplies and to deny them to a rival power.⁴⁸ A U.S.-led multinational effort, Operation Sentinel, to increase surveillance of and security in key waterways in the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz is under way. Washington is also contemplating re-creating the U.S. navy’s First Fleet in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁹ Shale oil may have made the U.S. energy self-sufficient but a whole range of interests (i.e., freedom of navigation, Israel’s security, Iran’s nuclear program, counter-terrorism, lucrative arms sales, commercial and trade ties) keep Washington engaged.⁵⁰ More importantly, each GCC member-state has a bilateral security pact with the U.S., with seven countries in the MENA region designated as major non-NATO allies. The U.S. figures prominently in

the small Gulf nations’ time-tested strategy of reliance on an external power to preserve balance. This strategic reality is unlikely to change. In other words, Beijing’s growing footprint forces Washington to be more receptive to the needs and strategic concerns of its Gulf allies and partners so as to reassure them about American security commitments.

Above all, China cannot provide the GCC security against Iran, only the U.S. can. Unlike Beijing, Washington is not arming Iran. China (along with Russia) uses Iran as its stalking horse because it is not strong enough to constrain the U.S. predominance in the region.⁵¹ Geo-strategy drives China closer to Iran but geo-economics pushes China towards the GCC countries. Iran’s belligerence diverts American resources and attention away from the Pacific to China’s advantage. In theory, resource-abundant Iran’s location, right next to Pakistan, can ensure security of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Chinese naval bases in the Strait of Hormuz. In reality, however, domestic instability, sanctions and the threat of war make Iran an unattractive economic partner. This is reflected in the low volume of bilateral trade at \$21 billion, including \$10-billion oil imports from Iran. Only about 3 percent of China’s oil comes from Iran, compared to 35 percent of its oil imports from the GCC. Despite the hype of a \$400-billion deal, China’s total trade with Saudi Arabia and the UAE is three to four times greater than with Iran.⁵²

Iran is a divisive issue. The GCC’s stance on Tehran is, by and large, in sync with Washington, not Beijing. The GCC accuses Iran of training, arming, funding terrorists and sectarian militias to destabilize its Sunni Arab neighbors. China’s enthusiasm for reviving the Iran nuclear deal is not shared by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Arguably, a downturn in the Gulf-U.S. relations may have emboldened the Houthis to step up their attacks on Saudi and the UAE targets.

The GCC expects China to help rein in Iran’s support for proxies and freeze nuclear program but Beijing often disappoints.⁵³ Chanting the mantra of “peace and development,” Chinese officials display a superficial understanding of regional fault lines, the Shia-Sunni divide and intractable territorial disputes. Beijing’s “even-handed balanced approach” becomes unsustainable when the Arab oil installations, airports, military bases or container ships come under repeated attacks from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. In contrast, American generals rush in to provide/bolster air and missile defense systems (Patriot

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interceptors)⁵⁴ to beef up security, and officials pledge “to do everything [the U.S.] can to help [the UAE and KSA] defend effectively” against Yemen Houthi attacks on both countries.⁵⁵ So, when the chips are down, nearly all Gulf states still “Look West” for security against regional threats. If anything, as a former Singaporean foreign minister points out, “the Ukraine crisis has [further] underscored the importance of regional balances and the vital role of the U.S. in such regional balances... This strategic reality is now evident in the Middle East and Europe as well. Everybody may have some reservations about the U.S., but nobody has any strategic alternative to the U.S. except subordination to China or Russia.”⁵⁶ Naser Al-Tamimi chimes in: “Middle Eastern states are aware of China’s limitations as a security provider and are, therefore, carefully managing their relationships with the U.S.”⁵⁷ Chinese strategists may hope to leverage the country’s economic clout for political benefit, but balancing the GCC and Iran is a difficult task, and appeasing historic rivals would prevent Beijing from achieving its own strategic goals. In time, China cannot avoid getting caught in the region’s tangled web of national and sectarian rivalries because commerce and security are inseparable. Economic, political, and security interests of all countries—big and small—cannot be compartmentalized as they are invariably intertwined.

China may one day be positioned with bases and boots on the ground, but make no mistake, these will be there to protect China’s own interests and assets, *not* necessarily to provide security to the Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran or Israel. The Gulf may be looking at China, but China as a global power looks in all directions, weighs its options and makes its moves carefully on multiple fronts. At any rate, Gulf geopolitics is a multilayered multiplayer game. Apart from the U.S. and China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Russia, and India too strive hard to shape regional choices and policy preferences. As the base race for forward presence intensifies amongst maritime powers, it may well be time to consider a Code of Unintended Encounters at Sea (CUES)-type agreement in the northern Indian Ocean to avoid incidents or accidents at sea.

Although China’s growing engagement helps with Gulf states’ economic diversification goals, it does create some challenges. What Beijing touts as a “win-win” strategy is widely seen as playing both sides to ensure a “double win” for China. There is also some wariness about Chinese business practices. More often than not, economic interdependence

Beijing’s growing economic ties with the MENA extend to military cooperation. China’s arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE increased by 386 percent and 169 percent, respectively, compared to the previous five years.

creates asymmetric relationships resulting in dependencies. It is worth noting German Foreign Minister’s warning after Italy signed the BRI MoU: “Countries that believe they can do clever business with the Chinese will wonder when they suddenly wake up in dependency.”⁵⁸ Besides, Chinese and Arab interests are not always complementary or frictionless. As Karen Young observes: “China is also a competitor in some areas where Arab Gulf states are investing in infrastructure, ports, and political outreach to secure new security partnerships, particularly in the Horn of Africa.”⁵⁹ The UAE found itself outmaneuvered when DP World was muscled out of Djibouti’s port by a Chinese conglomerate.⁶⁰ Likewise, the growing Chinese footprint in the Horn of Africa could undercut Saudi regional leadership aspirations as poor developing countries play “the China card” against regional heavyweights just as they do in South and Southeast Asia. The Gulf states are also aware of Beijing’s prickly and punitive behavior and penchant for coercion.

Economically, China may have already peaked. The world’s second largest economy has been decelerating quite rapidly since 2018 and, even more so, since the outbreak of COVID-19. The Middle East oil exporters’ bilateral trade deficits with China are growing fast while China’s investment in the Middle East has been declining sharply in recent years.⁶¹ The pandemic-induced slowdown in manufacturing and maritime shipping, the turmoil in Kazakhstan, conflict in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, and sanctions on Russia that cut it off from the international banking system have essentially derailed the Eurasian Silk Road component of the BRI. Put simply, Chairman

Xi's close friend Russia's Putin has done more damage to his dream project than anything his enemies could do in America, Japan, or India. Blocked in the northwest, China could conceivably double down on its investments, economic penetration and strategic footprint along the southwest Maritime Silk Road component of the BRI linking the Indian Ocean and the Middle East.

Last but not least, the U.S. and allies still retain an edge in emerging technologies. The global financial and technological systems are also skewed in the U.S.' favor. The efficacy and popularity of Western vaccines over Chinese ones that neutralized Beijing's "first mover advantage" in vaccine production and distribution is a case in point. Should the U.S. and the EU unite to deal with revisionist Russia and China, then instead of a multipolar world, a bipolar world would emerge that would limit the policy options and upset the calculations of small and middle powers in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The Gulf states' burgeoning relations with China should be seen in the context of geopolitical and economic power shifts. Long-term trends show greater integration between Asia and the Middle East. China's market size and economic weight as the world's largest trading nation give it enormous leverage in political and diplomatic matters. Uncertainty about the U.S. staying power coupled with shifts in global energy trade led the GCC states to "Look East" for new partners, providing an opening to China to wedge in. For many, "the China card" comes in handy to extract concessions from their traditional western allies. America's Gulf partners tactfully engage with China in ways that do not alienate Washington. While promoting trade and investment from China, they want to maintain U.S. military presence. China's diplomatic offensive has led it to offer something to everyone while assiduously avoiding taking sides so as to gain an upper hand economically and technologically in ways that would circumscribe U.S. power and influence. Investments in critical infrastructure allow Beijing to project power, reap financial rewards, secure resources, expand markets, acquire strategically-located bases, and undermine America's security alliances. Pressed to choose, they will have a hard time cutting their ties with Beijing or Washington. Most are averse to throwing in their lot with one or the other great power because maintaining good relations with all brings benefits, while

alienating one or more incurs costs. Maneuvering between major powers allows them to extract benefits from both sides. Should American and European firms fail to offer viable and cheaper alternatives to Chinese hitech products, countries in the Gulf and elsewhere will turn to Huawei/ZTE despite inherent security risks.

Since the turn of the century, every American president has tried but failed to pull out of the Middle East because the Gulf remains vitally important to a range of U.S. interests. Wherever America retreats, China advances. The success of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is linked to maintaining its presence in the resource-rich Gulf, and not letting China dominate it. The Gulf is certainly not insulated from the great power competition. Along with the Straits of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz constitutes the fulcrum of the U.S.-China rivalry. Neither the United States is done with the Middle East nor is the Middle East done with the United States.

The Gulf is a very complex geopolitical landscape. Beijing's plans to draw the Gulf into China's orbit while simultaneously expanding its ties with Iran and insulating itself from regional rivalries may come unstuck. Over the long term, as China entrenches itself in the Gulf, Beijing's current posture of "friend to everyone, allies with none" and hopes of avoiding political entanglement by promoting development from Istanbul to Islamabad are unlikely to be realized. Beijing would end up facing similar policy dilemmas, conflicting choices, provoking countervailing alliances and squandering its resources as others have in the past. China's neo-mercantilist and transactional approach would create opportunities for Beijing's rival powers. A significant improvement in the Gulf-China relationship notwithstanding, China will find it difficult to displace the U.S. as a security provider in the region. At the same time, for Washington to expect a monogamous relationship in a region ripe for polygamy with multiple suitors may well be a big ask.

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