

US-Gulf Reset in a Shifting Global Order

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Articles & Testimony

Although the Persian Gulf region is far from being fully self-sufficient, countries are gradually diversifying their partnerships—and doing so on their own terms.

In an era marked by shifting global dynamics, the United States finds itself navigating the choppy waters of China's ascendance and countering Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Against this backdrop, leaders in the Persian Gulf region and beyond are forging their own paths, with a pronounced emphasis on economic diplomacy, political de-escalation, and diverse strategic alignments.

The [invitation by the BRICS \(https://apnews.com/article/brics-russia-china-summit-b5900168d165cc78b36d5d5c068b7a50\)](#) grouping in late August to integrate six new members into the bloc underlines the challenges confronting the US in adapting to these changes, particularly in the Middle East. Though some countries have yet to respond to the invitation formally, it's likely that all—the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Argentina—will join Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as BRICS members in January.

Most of the realignments in the Middle East and the Gulf are rooted in the region's [quest for foreign-policy diversification \(https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/03/arab-de-escalations-and-realignments-amid-multipolarity-pub-89527\)](#). This urge can be traced to the rise of Asian economies two decades ago and, more significantly, to the American "[pivot to Asia \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/\)](#)" during the administration of President Barack Obama.

The growing perception that the US is distancing itself or wavering in its commitment as the region's primary security anchor has ignited a search for new policy frameworks. As the Gulf region experiences rapid economic growth, national policies are diverging from American interests, even as both regions maintain carefully measured alignments in security matters. While the sudden and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 played a crucial role in pushing Middle Eastern countries to look beyond Washington, at least three other US-led actions have shaped the region's new outlook.

Diversions from US Policy

First, many Gulf and Middle Eastern states were [reluctant to support \(http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/01/sprj.irq.arab.ministers/\)](#) the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, concerned that it would fuel Iran's regional expansion in a post-Saddam Baghdad. True to those fears, the following years of instability allowed the rise of Tehran-supported militias and parties in Iraq that often became [hostile to the Arab Gulf states \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/4/iraqi-militia-attack-on-uae-a-message-from-iran-say-analysts\)](#).

Second, while some in the region advised against Washington backing the removal of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, their concerns went unheeded. The Middle East has grappled with the ramifications of extreme Islamic politics ever since.

Finally, despite regional opposition to the nuclear deal with Iran, the US signed the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal\)](#) in 2015. Its subsequent reversal—and a yet-to-be-completed revision of the reversal—have further muddled perceptions of the United States' intentions in the region.

These events undermined American credibility. As a result, regional players took matters into their own hands in Yemen, which further strained their relationship with Washington. Most recently, Houthi drone attacks on [Saudi Arabia \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-25/saudis-say-strikes-targeting-energy-civilian-sites-thwarted\)](#) and the [UAE \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-says-missiles-drones-used-attack-some-intercepted-2022-01-20/\)](#) between 2019 and 2022 further tested the region's US partnership. It is yet to be seen to what extent the fighting between Israel and Hamas will further affect the US position in the Middle East, particularly if there is an escalation drawing in Iran's other proxy militias in the region.

After spending [\\$8 trillion in the Iraq and Afghanistan](#)

[\(https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/economic%23:-:text=Through%2520Fiscal%2520Year%25202022,%2520the,%2520Pakistan,%2520Iraq%2520and%2520elsewhere.\)](#)

wars and the "war on terror," the US has now spent some [\\$75 billion to help Ukraine \(https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/\)](#) counter Russian aggression, with promises of additional support. Much of the Middle East, which has sought to remain neutral on Ukraine, is biding its time and looking to maximize the benefits that a global realignment could have for middle powers.

Trade Diversification

China, meanwhile, has been quietly capitalizing on economic opportunities in the Middle East. Supported by partnerships in energy, trade, technology, and investment, China's dealings with the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries reached [US\\$233 billion \(https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-12-09/Xi-Jinping-says-China-GCC-states-natural-partners-for-cooperation-1fCZREQL1m/index.html\)](#) in 2021, a significant increase from [\\$134 billion \(https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/480d/9538861cd82a15aa8fb591b9c7a3f11e0688.pdf\)](#) a decade earlier. In comparison, US trade with the GCC was estimated at about [\\$60 billion \(https://asiahouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Middle-East-Pivot-to-Asia-Dec21_compressed.pdf\)](#) in 2019, down from about [\\$100 billion \(https://www.bbkonline.com/gcc-us-ink-agreement-to-enhance-bilateral-trade/\)](#) in 2011.

The [energy and trade volume \(https://asiahouse.org/research_posts/the-middle-east-pivot-to-asia-2022/\)](https://asiahouse.org/research_posts/the-middle-east-pivot-to-asia-2022/) between GCC states and their Asian counterparts—including India, South Korea, Japan, and the Southeast Asian group—significantly outweigh their dealings with the US. This relationship between leading oil producers and consumers in Asia has influenced the GCC’s foreign policy and security strategies.

Trade isn’t the only indicator alliances are shifting. The region’s strategic perspective also diverges from that of Washington. While defense and security ties with the West remain crucial, endeavors this year to [mend relations with regional adversaries \(https://gulfnews.com/business/analysis/gccs-relations-with-iran-in-for-a-reset--and-economic-gains-will-be-many-1.94632909\)](https://gulfnews.com/business/analysis/gccs-relations-with-iran-in-for-a-reset--and-economic-gains-will-be-many-1.94632909), such as Iran, signal a shift in focus toward prioritizing economic diplomacy. This evolved approach speaks to the region’s enhanced strategic autonomy.

Many countries in the Middle East now boast stronger economies and more robust military capabilities than in the past. While the region is far from being fully self-sufficient, it’s gradually diversifying its partnerships—and doing so on its own terms. The more Washington acknowledges this move toward strategic self-determination, the better it will align with the region’s aspirations and priorities.

At its core, the Arab Gulf region endeavors to be a realm where cooperation trumps confrontation. This spirit resonates in leaders’ preference for dialogue, diplomacy, and diversified alignments over militaristic interventions and proxy politics.

The heterogeneity of strategies within the GCC underscores the necessity for the US to recalibrate its approach. The road to rejuvenating the US-Gulf-Middle East partnership demands a nuanced understanding of the region’s worldview.

The Middle East, and particularly the GCC bloc, is not monolithic. Individual countries adopt varied strategies anchored in their unique interpretation of strategic independence.

Grasping the Middle East’s perception of global affairs, expanding initiatives like the Abraham Accords, endorsing niche collaboration frameworks such as the I2U2 (India, Israel, the UAE and the US), and broadening alliances by incorporating countries such as South Korea, Singapore and Japan could be initial steps in rejuvenating the region’s ties with Washington. As the Gulf nations chart new courses in a shifting geopolitical landscape, it’s imperative for US policymakers to recalibrate their strategies in kind.

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