

12-13-2022

Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Sim, Li Chen and Fulton, Jonathan, "Introduction" (2022). *All Works*. 5522.
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1 Introduction

Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton

In 2019 we published *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, a co-edited book that analyzed the approaches of extra-regional powers toward the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states.¹ Our focus was not limited to Asian countries in that book, instead looking at how a wide range of countries were pursuing multifaceted relations with a set of countries that play important roles in the global economy, most notably in energy markets but also in trade, investment, and finance. When that economic significance is combined with a geographic location that serves as a Eurasian and Indian Ocean hub connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Persian Gulf makes for a fascinating subregion from which to consider emerging geopolitical trends.

One of the key themes of that book was a looming order transition in the Gulf. As a result of shifting distribution of power at the systemic level, with the US relative power and influence decreasing, the ordering principles that had explained international politics in the Gulf since the end of the Cold War were changing. Because of this, we anticipated a deeper level of engagement in strategic concerns from both Gulf leaders and a range of extra-regional states with interests in the Gulf.²

Since then, this analysis seems increasingly accurate. Writing this chapter in early 2022, it is surprising how much distance there is between the leaders of the GCC countries – especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – and their counterparts in the US. An oft-repeated refrain, for instance, is that “the United States is becoming increasingly less reliable as a long term partner”³ even though there is ample evidence of continuing US interests in the region.⁴ This distance is frequently attributed to preferences or attitudes of US political leaders such as when the Senate voted in 2018 to end support for the Saudis in Yemen, but as Quilliam noted in 2020,

irrespective of president, the US has embarked upon a slow and inexorable withdrawal from the Gulf. The change is symptomatic of a structural shift in the balance of global power, rather than an expression of the proclivities of presidents Obama and Trump.⁵

During the Biden administration the trend has not reversed. In the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Biden was reportedly unable to reach the Saudi and Abu Dhabi Crown Princes for a telephone meeting to discuss the war's impact on global energy prices; they refused to take his call.⁶

Regional allies and partners have become convinced that the US commitment to the Gulf is soft, and in response have been charting foreign policies that diverge from Washington's on certain issues. The US pullout from Afghanistan in 2021 fed into the belief of US retrenchment from the Middle East,⁷ with the UAE's diplomatic advisor to the president and former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash saying,

We will see in the coming period what is going on with regards to America's footprint in the region. I don't think we know yet, but Afghanistan is definitely a test and, to be honest, it is a very worrying test.⁸

It is not simply a matter of signaling. Washington has determined the Indo-Pacific is its priority theater and China is its primary strategic competitor.⁹ While the Middle East and North African region is perceived to be less relevant to Washington's foreign and defense policy than at any other point since the late Cold War, the commensurate value of Transatlantic ties has been greatly enhanced as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The inevitable outcome is that Gulf leaders have been diversifying their extra-regional partnerships in response. They have also been in the process of reconsidering regional partnerships and rivalries. Diplomatic normalization between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain is evidence of this, with leaders in each country pursuing regional alignments that support their preferences of regional order.¹⁰ There has even been outreach to Turkey and Iran in line with the widespread perception that tensions of the past decade had reached an unsustainable level. With uncertainty about the direction of US–Gulf relations, regional leaders have been more assertive in pursuing their own approaches to the security issues they face.

Extra-regional countries with interests in the Gulf need to reconsider their approaches to the region as well.¹¹ US security commitments set the organizing principles of the Gulf throughout the post-Cold War era, and this allowed many countries to develop substantial regional presences dominated by economic opportunities without corresponding security roles. The possibility of US retrenchment changes the logic and cost-benefit calculation for them, and governments and companies in these countries will also have to recalibrate their Gulf policies.

This book examines how the evolving Gulf order affects the regional interests of Asian countries by offering a deep dive into the strategic considerations facing policy-makers in China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, and Pakistan. Each of these countries have deep interests in the Gulf, although there is variation between them, and as such they are vulnerable to the consequences of instability in the Gulf. A regional order transition therefore must be considered seriously, even if reluctantly, among their respective policy communities. Asian countries are major trade partners throughout the Gulf, with China, India, Japan, and South

Korea regularly among the top ten markets for the GCC as well as Iran and Iraq. Of course, energy trade is – and will continue to be – central to this. The tremendous economic growth in Asia over decades has required Gulf hydrocarbons; at the same time, Gulf human resource challenges and acute development needs have required Asian labor, capital, technical knowledge, and contracting. The resulting economic synergy between the Gulf subregion and Asia creates a degree of interdependence that could easily verge on vulnerability particularly if globalization recedes.

Many reading this will point out that the Gulf is already an Asian region to begin with. Both Chinese and Indian governments, for example, refer to it as a part of West Asia. Funabashi's seminal *Foreign Affairs* article from 1993, 'The Asianization of Asia,'¹² discussed the shift in core-periphery dynamics as Asian countries had reached such levels of development that they had come to see each other as primary partners or competitors; Western dominance in Asia, a historical outlier, no longer explained the region's political or economic order. As Gulf and Asian economies have steadily integrated, a growing body of academic work has adopted a more expansive understanding of Funabashi's 'Asianization' framework to explain this deeper engagement.¹³

This volume builds upon that work by addressing how Asian countries consider issues of Gulf security and insecurity in the context of their own interests. This is a topic that has not been studied widely yet, largely because of the dynamics described above. With the exception of Japan, the emergence of Asian countries as major economic actors in the modern Gulf is a recent phenomenon, and throughout much of this period US political, military, and economic dominance established patterns of engagement. Its allies and partners in the GCC cooperated with its allies and partners in Asia, with China seen as a free-rider that was still content to follow the leader. Little research was done on security issues because there was relatively little to study.¹⁴

We believe this is changing. A new dynamic in the international relations of the Gulf is evident: the arrival of Asian countries as major extra-regional actors. The underlying assumption is not that Asian powers have already become important security actors in the Gulf, but rather than they perceive the Gulf as a region of increasing strategic relevance. This leads us to consider several questions: How have Gulf security considerations informed the foreign policy of Asian countries? How will leaders in Asia adjust to an evolving regional framework? Will Asian rivalries make the region a theater of competition? Can we expect Asian states to balance, bandwagon, hedge, or adopt some other approach to their Gulf relationships? To what extent do their relationships with the US influence their approach to the Gulf? Such questions become all the more important as the western boundaries of Asia increasingly come to incorporate the Middle East.

That is not to underestimate the serious complications inherent in Gulf-Asia relations. As each of the chapters here emphasize, the countries in question face significant domestic political and economic pressures that limit their willingness or ability to play a more robust security role in the Gulf. Among many publics in the countries studied here the Gulf is not perceived as a high priority; pressing

concerns closer to home will always feature more significantly on the agenda. In India and Pakistan, South Asia is of vastly more immediate importance, Singaporeans are preoccupied with Indonesia and Malaysia, and China, Japan, and South Korea have significant challenges within East Asia. In many cases, as is evident throughout this book, these countries see each other as threats in their own regions, limiting the military resources they could divert to the Gulf. A related consideration is the challenging security environment throughout Asia. First and foremost is US–China strategic competition, which presents immediate threats and dilemmas for many Asian countries.¹⁵ Much like in the Gulf, a changing distribution of power in the Asian regional order is underway, and the consequences of this will result in an order transition.¹⁶ Add to this the fragmented political and security landscape of Asia itself; as Michael Cox points out, it “hardly exists as a collective actor.”¹⁷ There is a deep literature featuring optimistic narratives of an Asian Century,¹⁸ but this work often ignores or under-represents the deep-rooted rivalries that have the potential to make for a highly unstable region.¹⁹

With this book we present a novel analysis of Gulf–Asia relations. This set of empirically rich, theory-driven case studies was written by experts from or based in the Asian countries in question who have deep engagement with the Gulf; their analysis was largely drawn from local sources in multiple relevant languages. The chapters encompass Asian states in different subregions of Asia – South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia – and with different power configurations – middle powers and great powers – in the international system. Cognizant of the heterogeneity of Asia – in terms of territorial and population size, level of economic development, political regime types, attitudes toward great powers, and religious affiliations, among others – we have privileged in-depth country studies over thematic considerations.

In Chapter 2, Jonathan Fulton presents an analysis of the Gulf as a regional security complex in the early stages of an order transition. US hegemony has been the ordering principle of the Gulf since the end of the Cold War, but in recent years America’s military preponderance has been paired with a declining interest in regional leadership. Accurate or not, the resulting perception of a hegemonic retreat will impact the regional policies of all states with interests in the Gulf. For the Asian states studied in this volume, it becomes more complicated as they have to manage their relationships with states in the Gulf within the dual contexts of intra-regional rivalries as well as US–China great power competition.

In Chapter 3, Degang Sun argues that China seeks a zero-enemy policy in the Gulf by building a network of partnerships in order to dilute the US security alliance system. He identifies five pathways that have defined China’s attempts to respond to the Gulf security environment and concludes that these have successfully de-linked the global cold war (US–China rivalry) with the Gulf cold war (Saudi–Iranian confrontation). Consequently, China has, for now, avoided the participation of Gulf states in any potential US-led Gulf strategic alliance targeting China.

The role of the US is also a key consideration in the chapters on Japan and South Korea, both of which are alliance partners of the US. In Chapter 4, Yee-Kuang

Heng examines Japan's attempts to hedge and forge a more independent position from the US in Gulf affairs. Ultimately, he concludes that Japan has been unable to shape the evolving regional security architecture, notably on Iran and the GCC dispute; its security role therefore remains nascent.

In Chapter 5, Haewon Jeong writes about the Republic of Korea's decision to independently deploy the Cheonghae unit to the Strait of Hormuz. She adopts a securitization framework to explain that the US alliance was merely one of the considerations for the military dispatch. Pressure from domestic stakeholders was also key in shaping the contours of the deployment.

In Chapter 6, Li-Chen Sim references Singapore's strategic culture of 'vulnerability' and its impact on relations with the Gulf. She finds that while concerns about public order in Singapore prompted the initial impetus to engage with the Gulf states in the 21st century, the city-state's interests in economic prosperity and energy security largely mitigated perceptions of Gulf insecurity and instability.

The role of domestic considerations is also reflected in Mudassir Quamar's study on India in Chapter 7. The presence of a large Indian expatriate community in the six GCC countries and Indian dependence on the region for energy security make Gulf (in)security an internal political issue. At the same time, regional tensions and foreign policy responses of friendly and rival powers, including the US and China, inform New Delhi's room for maneuver.

In Chapter 8, Umer Karim presents a study of the interconnected nature of South Asia and the Gulf, using Pakistan–Gulf relations as a framework. He discusses the importance of Islam, elite relations, and military support as factors that contributed to a substantial Pakistani role in the Gulf's security architecture.

In Chapter 9, N. Janardhan considers the prospect of a post-US-led security framework for the Gulf, in which Asian countries are significant partners in a collective security approach. He posits that Gulf countries see Asian powers as important future allies, transitioning from transactional economic actors to agents capable of affecting regional geopolitics.

Going forward, we envision opportunities for an inside-out approach whereby Gulf states and entities at the subnational level weigh in on competition by extra-regional powers to engage them. A companion volume, written by Gulf experts, presenting Gulf perceptions of Asian engagement, would be a welcome addition to the literature on Gulf–Asia relations.

Notes

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- 3 Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, "The Rise of the United Arab Emirates", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2021, <https://www.thecairereview.com/essays/the-rise-of-the-united-arab-emirates/>.
- 4 William F. Wechsler, "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality," in Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli, eds., *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, ISPI-Atlantic Council Report, 8 October 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/mena-region-great-power-competition-24090>.
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- 6 Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and David S. Cloud, "Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls with Biden during Ukraine Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430>.
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- 9 United States and President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," March 2021.
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- 11 Jonathan Fulton, "China Between Iran and the Gulf Monarchies," *Middle East Policy* (2021), 28(3–4), 206–207.
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- 18 See, for example, Kishore Mahbubani, *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation* (London: Allen Lane, 2018); Parag Khanna, *The Future is Asian: Global Order in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2019).
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