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## 2 Asian Powers and a Transitioning Gulf Order

*Jonathan Fulton*

Regional orders became a more salient topic of study in International Relations with the transition of the international order from Cold War bipolarity to a US-centered unipolarity. As Buzan and Waever wrote, “the regional level is where the extremes of national and global security interplay, and where most of the action occurs.”<sup>1</sup> One important post-Cold War development in regionalism was described by Funabashi as the ‘Asianization’ of Asia: “As Asian nations phase out the special relationships they have had with former colonial powers and integrate with the global economy, they are starting to see neighboring countries as trading partners, providers of investment opportunities and competitors.”<sup>2</sup> Chang has expanded upon this political and economic focus of Asianization, describing a “dramatic intensification of intra-Asian interactions and flows in industrial, financial, demographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological spheres.”<sup>3</sup>

A by-product of this has been a broader conceptual approach to Asia, as regions and states across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region (IOR) integrate politically, economically, and culturally. The gradual shift of the global economic center of gravity shows what this means in material terms; located around the mid-North Atlantic Ocean in 1980, it is projected to be squarely between India and China by 2050. Much of global economic growth is coming from Asia, accounting for approximately one-third of global GDP in 2000 and expected to be more than 50% by 2040.<sup>4</sup> States that had been at the periphery of a Western-centered globalization and were therefore of marginal importance to each other have formed dense economic and political networks, giving shape to what some refer to as the Asian century.<sup>5</sup>

Currently the international order is undergoing another transition, from US-led unipolarity to a less centered system that will likely be multipolar.<sup>6</sup> While the systemic consequences of this transition have inspired a large body of analysis, the regional implications are no less important. Regions and subregions across Eurasia and the IOR, long shaped by systemic unipolarity, are increasingly competitive theaters as their own ordering principles begin to shift in response. Perceptions of hegemonic retreat remove restrictions on actors at the regional level, intensifying competition, which in turn affects the foreign policies of extra-regional powers. At the systemic level this is exacerbated by the ‘great power competition’ narrative taking hold in the US, China, and Russia to characterize

their complex relationships. Across Eurasia and the IOR this is made manifest in competing visions of order inherent in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership.<sup>7</sup>

In the Gulf subregion, this transitioning order could have significant consequences. In the West the Gulf has long been perceived as the outer limits of the Middle East–North Africa (MENA), whereas the governments of both China and India have identified it as part of West Asia–North Africa (WANA). This WANA designation reflects a different conceptualization of a region that defies easy geopolitical categorization. Given the Gulf's strategic and economic importance, it features in the foreign policy and energy security strategies of countries far beyond its shores. The Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb are two of the global economy's crucial chokepoints, giving the Arabian Peninsula a geo-strategic weight. With the Indo-Pacific becoming a policy framework for governments and academics, the acknowledgment of this subregion's importance in the north-west IOR makes it conceptually useful to consider the Gulf states within Funabashi's Asianization of Asia. This is consistent with a small but growing body of academic work that has largely focused on the economic implications of Gulf-Asia relations, with energy trade dominating.<sup>8</sup>

Security studies, however, remains under-analyzed,<sup>9</sup> a fact that can largely be attributed to US military preponderance in the Gulf. Deeply entrenched throughout the post-Cold War era, US security commitments to the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its securitized presence in Iraq since 2003 have supported a regional status quo that favors the Gulf monarchies. This has facilitated their deepening engagement with extra-regional states other than the US. As a result, there has been little need for these other extra-regional powers to make substantial contributions to Gulf security, a situation that is not likely to remain sustainable for the long-term. On the one hand, the depth of economic relations and large expatriate populations in the region indicate a need to assume a role in securing those interests. On the other, the perception of a looming US retrenchment, or at least a reduced role, is a motivating factor at the systemic level. A series of tweets in 2019 from President Trump justified this perception:

China gets 91% of its Oil from the Straight [*sic*], Japan 62%, & many other countries likewise. So why are we protecting the shipping lanes for other countries (many years) for zero compensation. All of these countries should be protecting their own ships on what has always been a dangerous journey. We don't even need to be there in that the U.S. has just become (by far) the largest producer of Energy anywhere in the world!<sup>10</sup>

While the tweets can be dismissed as the personal preferences of the former president, it does reinforce a widespread assumption that the US is reconsidering its role in the Gulf and broader MENA, one that has not changed with President Joe Biden's administration. Consequentially extra-regional powers with deep interests there must recalibrate their own approaches to the Gulf, especially where security issues are concerned.

This chapter sets the stage for the country-specific case studies of this edited volume. It analyzes the Gulf as a regional security complex (RSC) that has historically been shaped by a nexus of regional and systemic pressures. The contemporary Gulf order faces significant challenges at both of those levels, making it a difficult subregion to navigate for Asian powers that have long based their approaches to the Gulf on the foundation of US hegemony. This ordering principle is changing, and as a result the countries studied here – China, India, Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, and South Korea – have to determine how they will go about securing their interests in the Gulf, adopting presences that could either shore up, disrupt, or exit from a fragile regional status quo. It finds that these US allies or partners, not yet ready to pursue independent regional strategies, will continue to support US preferences for Gulf order with bandwagoning approaches. The increasingly hostile bilateral relationship between China and the US, however, means Chinese support for US policies in the Gulf cannot be taken for granted. Rather than a bandwagoner, China is a strategic hedger, developing its regional capabilities in anticipation of a more overtly competitive relationship with the US. The Gulf as a theater of great power competition is another variable that extra-regional states will have to consider in developing their policies toward the Gulf countries.

### **Ordering the Gulf: Regional and Systemic Pressures**

This section analyses the features of Gulf order, beginning with the assertion that it is best understood as an RSC. It then analyzes the Gulf RSC at two levels, the regional and systemic, to emphasize the different factors that leaders of Asian (and other extra-regional) countries must consider while engaging with their counterparts in the Gulf.<sup>11</sup>

Buzan defined an RSC as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.”<sup>12</sup> This is an apt description of the Gulf sub-region, where the eight states “focus intensely on each other and devote the bulk of their security resources to relations with each other and have done so for decades.”<sup>13</sup> Importantly, extra-regional great powers, responding to pressures at the systemic level, may become actors within an RSC, even though the region may not feature significantly in their own direct security concerns.<sup>14</sup> The steady expansion of the US presence in the Gulf is an example of the centrality of an extra-regional power in the Gulf and the impact it can have on regional order.<sup>15</sup> US interests have a major impact on the security and foreign policies of every Gulf country, while Gulf states feature significantly lower on the list of US concerns. The insights from RSC theory are useful here as Gulf states, as discussed below, find their own region especially threatening, and alignments with extra-regional powers have long been a foreign policy strategy, especially for the smaller Arab Gulf monarchies who lack conventional power capabilities when compared with Iran and Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

The most salient source of instability within the Gulf RSC is hostilities between Iran and its Gulf neighbors. This has been a consistent feature since the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was established in 1979 and ideological competition between regime types became prevalent, with post-monarchal Iran attempting to export its revolution to other Gulf states.<sup>17</sup> Iranian dissatisfaction with a MENA status quo supported by the US and favoring its GCC rivals has fueled its support for revisionist non-state actors – Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis – throughout the region. This is perceived as a threat to regime stability among the Gulf monarchies, an especially grave concern given instability across MENA in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The longstanding rivalry between revisionist Iran and the status quo GCC has resulted in a sub-systemic bipolarity, often described as a Middle East cold war.<sup>18</sup> US military preponderance was seen as the factor that prevented escalation to active hostilities, although this began to change during the Trump administration’s ‘maximum pressure’ campaign against Iran. Suffering economic and political isolation, Tehran adopted a more overtly aggressive approach to its neighbors, most notably with the spectacular drone attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019.

Intra-GCC rivalry is another factor that shapes the regional security environment. Tensions between the Gulf monarchies have always been prevalent but given the common external challenges, they largely remained in the background. This changed with the dramatic crisis that erupted in 2017 between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain on the other, drawing global attention to a rift that had widened in the wake of the Arab uprisings.<sup>19</sup> Qatari support for political Islamist groups put it at odds with the other four, all of which preferred maintaining a pre-uprising status quo that marginalized groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Shortly after Qatar was isolated, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced the formation of a bilateral alliance, further emphasizing the fractious nature of the GCC.<sup>20</sup> Kuwait and Oman both pushed for reconciliation but to little effect; the GCC crisis continued until January 2021, when the two sides began what will likely be a long process of reconciliation.

These tensions at the regional level are important considerations for extra-regional actors who must weigh the relative gains of engagement with certain states against the relative costs of alienating a rival. For example, in 2018 Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a state visit to the UAE, where he upgraded the existing bilateral relationship from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest level in China’s diplomatic hierarchy. This elevated the UAE to the same level as Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>21</sup> Months later, Qatar’s Emir Tamim Al Thani visited Beijing, an occasion that offered the same opportunity to upgrade the Sino-Qatari strategic partnership signed in 2014. Instead, China announced that it wanted to continue developing the relationship through the existing partnership agreement rather than raising Qatar to the same level as its GCC rivals.<sup>22</sup> While it was not made explicit, the implication appears that Beijing recognized that it had more to gain through deeper relations with the UAE rather than with an isolated Qatar.<sup>23</sup>

At the systemic level, the nature of the US presence in the Gulf is the major consideration for extra-regional states. With a deeply militarized presence on the Arabian Peninsula, US preponderance shapes the options available to other states. This began with the articulation of the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which proclaimed,

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>24</sup>

Yet it was not until the post-Cold War period when Kuwait (1991), Bahrain (1991), Qatar (1992), and the UAE (1994) signed defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) with the US that created the actual security architecture that has sustained the current regional order. Oman was an outlier, having signed a facilities access agreement (FAA) in 1980. There are approximately 35,000 US troops in the Gulf, with approximately 13,500 in Kuwait, 8,000 in Qatar, 5,000 in Bahrain, 3,500 in the UAE, 3,000 in Saudi Arabia, and a few hundred in Oman.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the troops, there are substantial military installations throughout the five states. Kuwait hosts US personnel at Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring, Ali Al-Salem Air Base, Shaykh Ahmed al-Jabir Air Base, and Camp Patriot. Bahrain has had a US naval command presence since 1948, although it was not an especially significant one until Central Command was established during the Regan administration and the Bahraini base housed the naval component, NAVCENT. Post-Desert Storm, the onshore command presence was established, and the Fifth Fleet was reconstituted in 1995. All of this is housed at the Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain. This facility has undergone a \$590 million expansion that started in 2010, bringing the total US cost of the facility to approximately \$2 billion.<sup>26</sup> Bahrain's Khalifa bin Salman Port accommodates US aircraft carriers and amphibious ships, its Shaykh Issa Air Base hosts US military aircraft, and it is also home to a facility for US Special Operations Forces.<sup>27</sup> Qatar hosts US Air Force personnel at the Al Udeid air base, which was built at a cost of \$1 billion in the 1990s and has since undergone expansion and enhancement with some US funding.<sup>28</sup> The UAE hosts US military personnel at the Jebel Ali Port; that and other UAE ports collectively host more US naval ships than any ports outside of the US. There are also US troops stationed at the Al Dhafra air base and naval facilities in Fujairah.<sup>29</sup> Oman, under its FAA with the US, provides access to military airfields in Muscat, Thurait, Masirah Island, and Musanah.<sup>30</sup> These DCAs and the FAA have been complemented with significant arms sales, military cooperation, and joint training exercises.<sup>31</sup>

A recurring theme in each of the chapters of this book is that extra-regional states must consider their Gulf relationships in the context of their relationship with the US. As US allies and partners, India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have adopted Gulf policies that align with US preferences and have relied on a

bandwagoning strategy to secure their interests. Their deep ties to the GCC support both their own economic interests and the US-preferred status quo. Their relations with Iran are also shaped by the status of US-Iran relations. After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015, each of these Asian countries looked at Iran as an important untapped market. When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and implemented new sanctions, that short-lived engagement with Iran came to an end, proving that the economic and political benefits of accepting US preferences in the Gulf outweighed potential benefits of forging an independent policy.

Singaporean companies, for example, were advised by the country's Foreign Ministry to heed US unilateral sanctions against Iran, noting that several have received heavy fines for multiple sanctions violations. While Singaporean officials were clear that they are not enforcing US sanctions, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was explicit that companies in Singapore should operate with the knowledge that "we expect companies with dealings with countries subject to unilateral U.S. sanctions will ... make their own calculations and decisions based on how this might impact on their own commercial interests."<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with the response in 2004 from a former Foreign Minister, who, when asked about Singapore support for the US war in Iraq, responded: "we are not pro-US; we are not anti-any country. What we are is that we are pro-Singapore in the sense that ultimately what guides us in our foreign policy is our national interest."<sup>33</sup>

India provides another example. It has been in discussions with the Iranian government to develop Chabahar port since 2003. For New Delhi this project would provide a corridor to reach Afghanistan, Central Asia, and ultimately Russia, representing important export markets and energy sources. The project remained stalled until 2016 after the JCPOA was signed, when there was a brief burst of energy as New Delhi and Tehran anticipated the long-awaited opportunity to develop the project. However, US withdrawal from the JCPOA two years later put India's Chabahar ambitions on hold once again.<sup>34</sup> While India's preference would clearly be to engage with Iran on Chabahar, it has proven unwilling to challenge US leadership despite the costs.

China presents a more complicated case. It is not a US partner or ally but its main strategic competitor, and China has also taken advantage of the US security umbrella to deepen ties to the GCC. It has also consistently complied with US sanctions on Iran, despite offering rhetorical support to the IRI.<sup>35</sup> Despite following US preferences in the Gulf, bandwagoning, which implies support for the hegemon's ordering principles, is a less satisfying explanation of Chinese regional behavior. China certainly has benefited from US preponderance in the Gulf, but increasingly proves unwilling to support it unconditionally.<sup>36</sup> Chinese officials have been outspoken about American approaches to Iran since the US withdrew from the JCPOA and adopted the 'maximum pressure' approach. In a 2019 meeting in Beijing with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shortly after the conclusion of joint naval exercises between China, Russia, and Iran, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said,

the unilateral withdrawal by the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, giving up on its international commitments and [attempts] to exert maximum pressure on Iran are the sources of the current tension arising over the Iranian nuclear issue.<sup>37</sup>

Days later, after the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani, Wang complained that the “dangerous US military operation violates the basic norms of international relations and will aggravate regional tensions and turbulence.”<sup>38</sup> When the US tried to extend the United Nations’ (UN) arms embargo on Iran months later, the Chinese mission to the UN tweeted, “US failed to meet its obligations under Resolution 2231 by withdrawing from #JCPOA. It has no right to extend an arms embargo on Iran, let alone to trigger snapback. Maintaining JCPOA is the only right way moving forward.”<sup>39</sup> In material terms this may not translate into a revisionist approach to the Gulf from China, but it does indicate that the US cannot take Chinese compliance for granted. As the great power competition narrative comes to dominate thinking about the US–China bilateral relationship, a more assertive China is likely to diverge from US preferences in MENA if Chinese leaders believe that their regional interests are no longer secured under the US umbrella.

Another factor that could result in different approaches to the Gulf from Asian countries is the widespread perception that the US is in the process of attempting to reduce its regional role.<sup>40</sup> As described above, its diplomatic and military commitments to Gulf partners and allies remain robust, yet at the same time, political pressure from a public favoring a less active presence in MENA has steadily been building. This is not simply a matter of a public response to unpopular policies; US interests in the region have long been transitioning. Former US Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk argued this point in a 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article, claiming “few vital interests of the U.S. continue to be at stake in the Middle East.”<sup>41</sup> The belief that MENA issues have a direct impact on the US is declining:

There are no more imperiling threats from the Middle East that endanger America’s social life, economic affluence, and political institutions; and so controlling this region as uncontested hegemon is no longer vital to the US position as a global superpower.<sup>42</sup>

Its core MENA interests have long been ensuring MENA energy supplies safely reach global markets, freedom of navigation in and across an important geopolitical region, and contributing to Israeli security. Meeting these interests no longer requires a US hegemonic presence. In terms of energy, America’s emergence as the world’s largest energy producer recalibrates global energy markets. In fact, the dramatic price drop during the 2020 Saudi-Russia ‘oil war’ demonstrates that in energy markets, US and Gulf producers are competitors as well as necessary partners to stabilize oil markets. As far as freedom of navigation, the capacity of other extra-regional powers to play a larger role in maintaining open shipping lanes is increasing, albeit slowly; President Trump’s previously mentioned tweets



underscore why they likely see it as a necessity. The US-led Operation Sentinel is a multilateral consortium of nine countries (Albania, Australia, Bahrain, Britain, Lithuania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US) to “promote maritime stability, ensure safe passage, and de-escalate tensions in international waters” surrounding the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>43</sup> A complementary mission is the European-led maritime surveillance mission in the Strait of Hormuz, including Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Both Japan and South Korea have deployed independent maritime missions as well.<sup>44</sup> These initiatives offer visions of what a less US-centered security architecture could look like. Israeli security has also been rendered less immediate after it established diplomatic relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020. While it still faces serious threats from Iran and its proxies, the range of state-driven threats from within MENA is as low as it has ever been.<sup>45</sup> Taken together, the changing nature of US interests in MENA requires a foreign policy recalibration as well, a point Karlin and Witts emphasized in arguing that although the “Middle East still matters to the United States, it matters markedly less than it used to,” explaining why recent presidential administrations shared “the view that the United States is too involved in the region.”<sup>46</sup> All of this contributes to a widely-shared belief that the US is looking for a MENA exit strategy.

### **A Gulf order in flux: order transition, not Power Transition**

What would US hegemonic retreat mean for Gulf order? The 2003 invasion of Iraq is a major inflection point, and the consequences of the US’ inability to achieve its goal of building a stable democratic Iraqi state has brought the idea of US hegemony in the Gulf into question. Gause has described this unsuccessful attempt at re-ordering the Gulf subregion as ‘failed hegemony.’<sup>47</sup> Philips has referred to ‘perceived hegemony’:

the US has still been perceived by many Middle Eastern actors to be hegemonic, while Washington has understandably not sought to promote the reality that it is less dominant than before. This misperception has impacted some states’ policies, with allies such as Saudi Arabia repeatedly urging the US to be more active, and growing disillusioned with Washington when it refused.<sup>48</sup>

Regional leaders must consider the US in their strategic calculus, but Washington’s ability to achieve its preferred outcomes in the Gulf, either through force or persuasion, are limited, making the classification of the US as a Gulf hegemon inaccurate. Schmidt’s definition of hegemony rests on two pillars: preponderant power and the exercise of leadership.<sup>49</sup> Ikenberry and Nexon also emphasize the importance of the mobilization of leadership “by a preponderant power to order relations among actors”<sup>50</sup> as a feature of hegemony. Goh’s study of East Asia in the post-Cold War era makes the same point, that US regional hegemony was established and maintained “not merely as a result of its preponderance of power, but mainly because of the complicity of key regional states, which prefer to sustain a

regional order underpinned by US primacy and leadership.”<sup>51</sup> As described above, US power remains preponderant by conventional measures. Yet in constantly signaling its intention for a reduced role, US leadership is questioned.

Cooley and Nexon’s work on hegemony emphasizes an important point for Gulf order, explaining that in hegemonic systems “the dominant power enjoys a near monopoly on the provision of international goods” or what they describe as ‘patronage monopoly,’<sup>52</sup> which includes security commitments. The Gulf monarchies have long relied upon this to balance against their larger aggressive neighbors, but the alignment with the US has never been a comfortable fit. For one thing, it has always been a set of interest-based rather than values-based relationships, anchored by political and military elites rather than popular support or shared values. Another issue is the asymmetrical nature of the relationships, which triggers a constant fear of abandonment within the GCC states. Al Shayji has described US-GCC relations as “a classic case study of the built-in dilemmas of an alliance between a stronger party and a weaker party.”<sup>53</sup> Add to these factors the prevailing narrative of US retreat from MENA, and the gap between the reality of deep military commitments and the belief of an imminent American retreat becomes clearer. This in turn explains MENA policies from GCC states that often diverge from the US and the increasing outreach to other extra-regional powers for a wider array of interests beyond trade and investment. This also features in Cooley and Nexon’s analysis of the decline of US hegemony: “But even if the hegemon and its allies remain committed to supplying public, private and club goods, the greater availability of alternative suppliers – of exit options – affects the calculations of other states.”<sup>54</sup> US allies and partners in the Gulf have been in the process of developing these exit options, although their preference is clearly to maintain a close security relationship with the US.

Consequently, the Gulf is a subregion in flux. The rise of China has resulted in a growing body of work on power transition theory to explain the emerging global order.<sup>55</sup> Focusing on systemic instability that arises when a rising power’s interests challenge those of a declining hegemon, this fits with the widespread perception of a US in relative decline and a rising China, with the ‘Thucydides Trap’ becoming a shorthand for great power competition.<sup>56</sup> In the Gulf, as in many other regions around the world however, this is not an accurate depiction of the distribution of power. China’s military power in the Gulf is not simply lagging behind the US; it is practically non-existent at this point. While this may not be the case for long, it is unrealistic to imagine any scenario in which Chinese forces could challenge those of the US in the Gulf region. A traditional power transition is not happening in the Gulf, at least not yet. However, it is not unreasonable to describe it as a subregion in the early stages of an order transition. Goh describes the conditions of the end of a hegemonic order as taking place when “hegemonic challengers necessarily dispute not only the incumbent’s hierarchical position, but, more importantly, seek to revise the existing structure of differential benefits.”<sup>57</sup> This provides a useful framework for considering Russia’s emergence as a no-strings attached weapons supplier for MENA states, or China’s as a provider of hard and soft infrastructure throughout the region; the ‘patronage monopoly’

that Cooley and Nexon describe has been challenged. Ambitious extra-regional actors have interpreted US hegemonic retreat as an opportunity to make inroads in a region that has considerable strategic value.<sup>58</sup> Regional actors, intensely aware of the value of great power partnerships, are receptive to these overtures. The US remains the most powerful conventional actor in the Gulf regional security complex, but no longer enjoys what Wight called the ‘justification of power’: the legitimacy to set the rules of a hegemonic order.<sup>59</sup> This order in transition will require states with regional interests to reconsider how they engage with the Gulf.

## **Asian Responses**

What impact would a Gulf order transition have on the interests of Asian states with deep regional interests? The Asian countries featured in this set of chapters have largely benefited from US hegemony in the Gulf, taking advantage of American security commitments to develop substantial economic presences without assuming a corresponding set of their own security commitments. A US hegemonic retreat would likely require a recalibration of their thinking about how to best approach Gulf security issues. They could use existing alignments in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Conversely, they could determine that their interests dictate a lighter engagement without the safety of the US umbrella. Each has important commercial interests in the Gulf and relies heavily upon its energy. Economic interdependence would indicate a motivation for being involved in regional security. At the same time, each state under consideration has a different strategic logic, informed by domestic, regional, or systemic pressures that will determine whether it is worth shifting more military and diplomatic resources into an unstable subregion.

Asian states are certainly important markets and partners for their counterparts in the Gulf. As seen in Table 2.1, Asia’s great powers – China, India, and Japan – are all major import and export partners throughout the Gulf, while middle powers Singapore and South Korea have dense trade ties with some but not all. This is not symmetrical by any means. For example, while China was Saudi Arabia’s top import and export partner in 2020, Saudi Arabia ranked as China’s 24th largest export market and 13th largest source of imports.<sup>60</sup> The nature of the trade, with energy central to continued Asian economic growth, gives Gulf suppliers an outsized importance, however. Beyond trade, contracting, construction, and services make the GCC states especially attractive partners for each of the Asian states in question, making for economic relationships that appear remarkably sustainable for the long-term.

Yet despite these economic interests, security relations remain relatively underdeveloped. To be sure, there are nascent moves in this direction, with several initiatives developing in recent years. India has intensified strategic relations with GCC countries to the detriment of Iran. In 2014 it signed a defense cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, and a comprehensive strategic partnership with the UAE in 2017.<sup>61</sup> During a state visit to Oman in 2018 Prime Minister Modi announced the signing of an agreement that provides the Indian navy with access

*Table 2.1* Ranking of Asian Countries as Import/Export Partners for Persian Gulf Countries, 2020

	China		India		Japan		Singapore		South Korea	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
Bahrain	1	2	5	6	4	37	9	10	10	15
Iran	1	1	3	12	30	35	34	61	20	59
Iraq	1	1	3	2	17	21	26	4	5	5
Kuwait	1	3	6	5	5	44	40	24	14	29
Oman	3	1	2	5	20	7	23	9	9	3
Qatar	2	2	5	3	9	1	17	5	16	4
Saudi Arabia	1	1	5	2	6	3	25	7	9	4
UAE	2	4	3	2	5	3	25	5	14	10

Source: International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics, 2020.

to Oman's port facilities in Duqm.<sup>62</sup> There are several economic reasons for India to deepen ties to the GCC states. Energy security is a factor; India is set to become one of the world's largest hydrocarbon importers; its oil demand is forecast to increase to ten million barrels per day by 2040, up from 4.7 million in 2017.<sup>63</sup> Gulf energy features significantly in its consumption, with oil and gas from the GCC consistently supplying India with over 50% of its imports. There is a substantial Indian expatriate population on the Arabian Peninsula, estimated at nine million.<sup>64</sup> Remittances from non-resident Indians in the Gulf are a major source of income, accounting for 2% of its gross domestic product in 2019.<sup>65</sup> Trade is also an issue; as seen in Table 2.1, India does a significant volume of trade with the GCC.

There is a strategic logic as well. India's largest security concern remains Pakistan, which has long used Sunni Islam solidarity and security cooperation as a means of strengthening its own relations with the Gulf countries. India's difficult history with Islam has contributed to uneasy state-to-state relations with the GCC countries since partition. However, both sides have come to see value in cooperation to address their own regional security challenges. By engaging more deeply with India, the GCC states have made Iran a less attractive partner for New Delhi. Over the past twenty years India's ties with Iran have cooled while those with the GCC have grown considerably. This works in the other direction as well; India's much larger market and investment opportunities have attracted the GCC while minimizing their reliance on Pakistan. Indian orientation in the Gulf is therefore aligned with the GCC and is likely to maintain this trajectory, with or without US commitments.<sup>66</sup>

Both Japan and South Korea have domestic constraints that limit significant security cooperation, but have made inroads nonetheless. In Japan's case, Article 9 of its constitution renounces war and pledges that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." The Japanese military is therefore defensive by design with limited power projection capabilities. However, it is making minor moves in this direction. In 2017, for example, it appointed its first defense attaché to the UAE in a move described as part of an effort to advance security cooperation.<sup>67</sup> As discussed in Heng's chapter,<sup>68</sup> Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force sent a destroyer to the Gulf in early 2020 after a visit to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE from former Prime Minister Abe, who described the mission as necessary because "Thousands of Japanese ships ply those waters every year including vessels carrying nine tenths of our oil. It is Japan's lifeline."<sup>69</sup> (See Table 2.2.) Still, despite this rhetoric Japan's engagement does not represent a substantial contribution to maritime security.

As for South Korea, the domestic variable is the ongoing hostilities between it and North Korea; it is both militarily and politically challenging to commit troops to a far-off region with immediate security threats at the border, a point Jeong's chapter in this volume illustrates.<sup>70</sup> However, deeper economic engagement, especially with the UAE, has resulted in security cooperation. In 2009, South Korea's Korea Electric Power Corporation signed a \$20.4 billion contract with the UAE's Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation to design, build, and operate four ARR1400 nuclear power units at the Barakah nuclear power plant, which

*Table 2.2 Persian Gulf Crude Oil as Percentage of Asian Imports, 2019*

China	43%
India	57%
Japan	84%
Singapore	66%
South Korea	63%

Source: US Energy Information Administration, Country Analysis, 2020; compiled by author.

opened in 2020.<sup>71</sup> In 2018 it was revealed that a clause was added to the deal that, according to former Defense Minister Kim Tae-Young, “guarantees the Korean military’s automatic intervention in an emergency in the UAE.”<sup>72</sup> Minister Kim described it as a “low-risk” commitment because “the UAE is a country in which a war had not taken place for a long time.”<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, this detail was not made public until 2018, underscoring the political sensitivity involved in overseas security commitments. Another element of the South Korea–UAE security relationship is the deployment of the Akh Unit, South Korean special forces, that conducts joint training exercises and counterterrorism training in the UAE and has been deployed since 2011.<sup>74</sup>

As Sim discusses in her chapter,<sup>75</sup> Singapore has also made contributions to Gulf security, but it too faces limitations. Singapore’s primary security concerns remain rooted in Southeast Asia, and as a result its leaders cannot overcommit to Gulf partners. Still, it contributed, alongside Gulf states, to the US-led Combined Task Force 151 anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden between 2009 and 2014.<sup>76</sup> Singapore deployed nearly 1000 Singapore Armed Forces personnel to Iraq under the UN stability restoration operation between 2003 and 2008.<sup>77</sup> It also has contributed to the coalition against the Islamic State, providing another opportunity to work with Gulf counterparts and reinforce Singapore’s reputation as a responsible regional actor.

China too has made moves toward a larger security role, albeit in a somewhat more balanced manner consistent with the ‘zero-enemy’ strategy described in Sun’s chapter in this book.<sup>78</sup> For example, it followed joint drills with the Saudi navy in November 2019 with trilateral exercises with Iran and Russia one month later.<sup>79</sup> Chinese and Saudi Arabian special forces first conducted joint training exercises in 2016 shortly after announcing their comprehensive strategic partnership.<sup>80</sup> Arms sales have long featured in the bilateral relationship as well, although on a modest scale when compared with the US. Chinese sales have largely filled a gap when the Gulf monarchies have not been able to purchase from the US, their vendor of choice. A case in point is a Chinese ballistic missile sale to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s that eventually paved the road for Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations. The Saudis approached China because the US, under pressure from Israel, refused an arms sale to Riyadh.<sup>81</sup> An upgrade to the initial set of missiles was sold

to the Saudis in 2014.<sup>82</sup> Qatar has also purchased ballistic missiles from China.<sup>83</sup> Another component of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Saudi Arabia was a deal between the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology and China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to build a factory in Saudi Arabia to assemble and service Chinese Ch-4 drones for sales to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Egypt, and Iraq.<sup>84</sup> This is only the second Chinese UAV factory to be built outside of the PRC. This too is the result of an inability to purchase the preferred US option, in this case Predator UAVs, due to tight US export restrictions on armed drones. Beyond joint training exercises and these relatively modest arms sales, China's security footprint in the Gulf remains quite shallow.

Despite the beginnings of a larger security presence, the logic for each of these countries appears to be consistent with hegemonic stability theory. A liberal argument emphasizes the economic benefits of maintaining the regional status quo and continuing to bandwagon with US preferences in support of its Gulf allies and partners. Challenging the US through soft or hard balancing would result in costly competition that would only harm their own economies and present challenges in other more vital regions.<sup>85</sup> Since the Gulf is not a core interest for any of these countries – in each case their primary security concerns lie elsewhere: in South Asia for India; in East Asia for Japan, South Korea, and China; and Southeast Asia for Singapore – supporting a fragile status quo in the Gulf continues to make sense. A realist argument would posit that a state will accept the status quo so long as the benefits are greater than the costs; once that situation changes, the willingness to accept the dominant state's preferences would pass.<sup>86</sup> Of the Asian states discussed here, only China could be expected to adopt this logic, given its competitive relationship with the US. In the near term, however, the cost-benefit calculation does not favor challenging the status quo. China has actively been working to avoid disrupting a fragile Gulf order that continues to provide benefits.

This has important implications. Since India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea are all US allies or partners, their participation in Gulf security is not perceived as disruptive by the US. China is another matter. Asked in 2019 if China would consider participating in Operation Sentinel, Ni Jian, its ambassador to the UAE, commented that “We are studying the U.S. proposal on Gulf escort arrangements,”<sup>87</sup> but Beijing ultimately declined. It is not surprising that China would reject working with a US-centered maritime force given the competitive nature of their relationship in other regions. Beijing has serious concerns about America's ability and motivation to constrain China's rise to superpower status, and several recent US government documents justify this concern. The 2017 US National Security Strategy described “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order” that is “taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.” It directly targeted China, claiming “Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>88</sup> The US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, declassified in January 2021, makes this even more clear; its first national security challenge is “How to maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing

China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity?”<sup>89</sup> This has not changed with the President Joe Biden administration, which released its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document that describes China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”<sup>90</sup> For Chinese leaders, therefore, a foreign policy across the IOR cannot be premised on US willingness to accommodate an increase in Chinese power and influence.

In this case, a theory between bandwagoning and balancing is required to explain China’s approach to the Gulf, and strategic hedging offers the most accurate account. Strategic hedging is an approach common to second-tier powers that want to increase their political, economic, and military capabilities without antagonizing the dominant power.<sup>91</sup> Goh defines it as a “set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.”<sup>92</sup> By not overtly challenging the dominant power, the hedger expands its regional capabilities, usually by economic means, and then slowly by developing the military capacity to protect its gains.<sup>93</sup> Looked at in this light, China’s balanced approach, developing strong economic and political ties with every state in the Gulf, is a textbook example of hedging.<sup>94</sup>

The implications of this for Gulf countries and those Asian states with dense regional interests are important. If the US is looking for a reduced Gulf role yet at the same time challenging China in other theaters of the Indo-Pacific, a more assertive Chinese presence in the Gulf is a likely result. Beijing, believing that it cannot rely upon US preponderance to secure Chinese citizens, assets, and commercial relations in the region, will need to rely on its own steam. As described above, China’s power projection in MENA remains limited; the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) support base in Djibouti remains, as of mid-2021, its only overseas military installation. However, the announcement in 2018 of the ‘Industrial Park – Port Interconnectivity, Two Wings and Two Wheels’ initiative hints at more to come.<sup>95</sup> This initiative links Chinese commercial investments in industrial parks and ports spanning from the UAE to the Suez Canal, ultimately linking supply chains and business clusters from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. While the Djibouti base is the only military facility in this initiative, China appears to be laying a foundation to a regional foothold that could, if the need arose, eventually provide the PLAN with port facilities in the northwest IOR.

For the time being this is unlikely. The GCC countries have been diversifying their extra-regional relationships in a manner that is also consistent with hedging,<sup>96</sup> but giving China naval access in the form of bases would be a breaking point in their relationship with the US. While America’s long-term presence in the Gulf is perceived as uncertain, there is no expectation that China or any other country is willing or able to make the same kind of security commitments that the US has provided over the past 30 years. The GCC countries and China will



continue to engage with each other, but both sides are aware that the repercussions of crossing an American red line are not yet worth the cost.

For Asian extra-regional powers, the US–China competition is no less challenging and threatens their interests in the Gulf and beyond. Asian security is under-institutionalized and reliant upon the US hub-and-spoke alliance system.<sup>97</sup> Beneath the tremendous development and prosperity lies what Lee calls ‘the Asian paradox’: it is “a region that has been an unparalleled economic success but that is also home to the world’s most dangerous, diverse, and divisive security, military, and political challenges.”<sup>98</sup> The prospect of a US–China relationship that transitions from competitive to confrontational could have dangerous consequences in flashpoints like the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, or the Taiwan Strait. Singapore’s prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, voiced this concern: “if Washington tries to contain China’s rise or Beijing seeks to build an exclusive sphere of influence in Asia – they will begin a course of confrontation that will last decades and put the long-heralded Asian century in jeopardy.”<sup>99</sup> Gulf countries, newly Asianized, are equally vulnerable.

## Conclusion

States around the world are deeply integrated politically, militarily, and economically with both the US and China. The prospect of becoming caught between the two superpowers is unappealing, and significant diplomatic energy will likely be expended in an attempt to strike a balanced approach. Alignment patterns across the IOR might make this difficult to achieve, however, as the US approach to the Indo-Pacific, centered on security cooperation with the Quad, is seen by Beijing as a China containment strategy.<sup>100</sup> A similar dynamic is at play in the Gulf, as the US has pressured its regional allies and partners to eliminate engagement with China in areas with security risks, especially technological cooperation in 5G networks, artificial intelligence, satellite communications, and cybersecurity.<sup>101</sup> It is increasingly clear that despite local preferences, the Gulf is under threat of becoming a theater of great power competition between the US and China.

Asian countries, with their reliance on Gulf energy and strong economic incentives to maintain strong Gulf relations, will need to skillfully navigate this transitioning regional order.

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