

Strategic Diversification and the Shifting Role of the United States in Gulf Cooperation Council Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving foreign policy strategies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, focusing on their efforts to reduce dependency on the United States for security. The analysis is framed within the realist theoretical framework, a dominant paradigm in international relations that asserts that states' primary concern is security. Realists argue that in an anarchic international system, where no central authority exists to enforce peace, states must rely on their capabilities to ensure their survival and seek to maximize their security by balancing power and forming alliances that mitigate external threats. This core principle of realism underpins the strategic decisions of states in the Gulf region, particularly as they respond to changes in the international power structure. While the U.S. has historically served as a crucial security guarantor, its influence in the region has diminished, and these states are increasingly turning to alternative security partnerships. Realist theory predicts that states will adjust their foreign policies to reduce vulnerabilities and maximize security, which explains the GCC's increasing diversification of alliances. The study concludes that as U.S. influence in the region wanes, Gulf states diversify their security alliances to safeguard national interests, a process that highlights key realist principles such as self-help, power balancing, and security maximization.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; GCC; United States; Middle East; Realism

INTRODUCTION

The foreign policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by changing power dynamics and the perceived decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East. Historically, the U.S. has been a central security partner for many of these states, particularly following the Gulf War of 1990-1991 and the post-9/11 security arrangements. However, recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy, including a pivot towards Asia and reduced military engagement in the Middle East, have prompted GCC states to reassess their security strategies. This paper explores how these states have adopted strategic diversification policies, seeking new alliances to reduce their dependence on the U.S. and enhance their security. By applying realist theory, this study analyzes how the GCC's shifting security policies reflect broader trends in international relations and the quest for strategic autonomy. Realist theory highlights the importance of ensuring multiple options and strategic flexibility in foreign policy. The GCC's diplomatic strategy exemplifies this principle by engaging with rival powers to maximize their leverage and avoid being forced into binary choices. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic outreach to Iran, while maintaining its

security ties with the U.S., allows it to manage regional tensions and preserve strategic options with both adversaries and allies. Similarly, their engagement with China and Russia further illustrates the Gulf state's ability to balance economic, political, and security interests. These states maintain flexibility in their foreign policy, keeping doors open with multiple powers without being locked into any one alliance or framework. This ability to leverage different relationships reflects the realist notion that states maximize their security and autonomy by ensuring they have various options.

This research explores the role of power dynamics, security concerns, and strategic adaptation within the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, emphasizing the fundamental principles of realism in international relations. Realism posits that states act rationally to ensure survival and maximize their influence in an anarchic international system. This study examines the strategic recalibrations of Gulf states, specifically through the lens of the Abraham Accords, U.S.-GCC relations, and the Gulf Crisis, demonstrating how states adjust their strategies in response to evolving regional and global power shifts.

The Abraham Accords are a significant development demonstrating how Gulf states prioritize strategic alliances to counter emerging threats and enhance their security. This realignment reflects the realist focus on self-interest and pragmatic decision-making as Gulf states reassess their regional priorities and pursue partnerships that bolster their security. The U.S.-GCC relationship further underscores the asymmetry of power within these alliances. It illustrates how smaller states navigate their dependence on U.S. security guarantees while diversifying their external partnerships to mitigate vulnerabilities, as seen in the UAE's diversification efforts. These examples align with realist theories, highlighting the interplay between identity, material interests, and strategic adaptation in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) policies. The Accords reflect a practical reevaluation of regional priorities, underscoring how states, driven by survival and the desire to maximize influence, seek new partnerships to safeguard their interests. However, the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict and developments in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran present a challenge to these recalibrations, exposing the tension between the Gulf states' pursuit of self-interest and their broader peace-building goals. In a realist context, where security and survival are paramount, these competing priorities illustrate the complex balance between pragmatic security calculations and long-term regional stability.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Realist theory in international relations focuses on the role of state interests, power dynamics, and the competition for influence in a world marked by anarchy and the lack of overarching authority. Realists emphasize that states act primarily out of self-interest to secure their position in the international system, often using tools like diplomacy, economic power, and military force to achieve their goals (Coates Ulrichsen, 2024).

Realist theory highlights the importance of power relations and the balance of power in international relations, where the interests of powerful states and the limitations of international organizations shape the outcomes of global issues. Erdos (2024) argues that the theory allows one to analyze how states and international organizations pursue their national interests within a competitive, anarchic international system. In realist theory, the focus is often on power dynamics, security,

and states' self-interest rather than idealistic principles such as justice or peace. Accordingly, in a realist framework, international organizations operate based on the interests of their most powerful members. States with less power would face significant obstacles due to the lack of military or economic power. In comparison, states with more power would continue to act in ways that protect their national interests.

Realism suggests that states prioritize their national interests and maximize their power within the international system, while non-state actors are seen as tools to advance state interests. Realists would argue that non-state actors are rarely independent of state objectives, although they are instrumentalized to enhance the state's legitimacy and soft power. Realism also focuses on power dynamics and how states seek to maintain control over their territories and influence. It explains regulatory changes as a way for the state to maintain sovereignty and prevent any challenge to its authority, especially from non-state actors that might engage in activities outside the state's control or foreign policy agenda. Coates Ulrichsen (2024) argues that whether non-state actors can act autonomously from state interests is central to realist theory. He explains that according to realism, non-state actors are unlikely to remain fully independent from state influence in an anarchic international system where states are the principal actors. Non-state actors, especially in the context of foreign aid, are more likely to be aligned with the state's geopolitical and economic goals, as their activities are constrained by state interests, reflecting a broader realist concern that states will use all available tools, including non-state actors, to enhance their power and global position.

It is further argued that the September 11 attacks and the Arab Spring fundamentally changed the geopolitical environment in the Gulf and the Middle East, altering how states and non-state actors interact. Accordingly, realists would argue that these events disrupted the balance of power and forced states to adjust their strategies to maintain regional influence since non-states are shaped by shifting geopolitical interests, particularly about the global war on terror and regional instability. This analysis demonstrates that according to realism, states adjust their policies to co-opt or regulate these non-state actors to ensure they do not undermine state interests. However, realist theory also explains that pushback from non-state actors against state control or regulation is part of the power struggle between state authority and non-state autonomy. Non-state actors resist overregulation to maintain their autonomy and assert independence from state-led agendas, with the result that this dynamic reflects the ongoing tension between state sovereignty and non-state agency in international relations, which is a recurring theme in realist thought.

From a realist perspective, the evolving foreign policy behavior of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the shifting balance of power and the need to secure national interests in a volatile region. Priya (2024) explains that realism emphasizes the pursuit of power and survival in an anarchic international system, and the GCC's focus on diplomacy, diversification of partnerships, and prioritization of economic and non-traditional security concerns demonstrates a calculated strategy to enhance their influence and resilience. By aligning with multilateral institutions, the GCC states are hedging against overreliance on traditional Western allies while safeguarding their sovereignty and regional standing. The embrace of positive interdependence and cooperation can be seen as a means to stabilize the region and mitigate threats, ensuring their economic and political interests remain secure amidst conflicts such as the war in Gaza, the war in Lebanon, and the collapse of the Syrian regime. The events in Gaza, Lebanon, and

Syria illustrate a broader shift in Middle Eastern geopolitics, where traditional alliances are being tested and new power structures are emerging (Petrosyan, 2023). Central to this transformation is the weakening of Iran's influence, particularly in Syria, where its once-dominant position has been undermined (Kanol, 2024).

THE DECLINING INFLUENCE OF THE U.S.

The perceived decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East has been a central factor driving the foreign policy shifts of Gulf states, changing geopolitical priorities, and shifting towards a more multilateral foreign policy. The decline in U.S. commitment to Gulf security, epitomized by its pivot towards Asia, has created uncertainty among GCC states, which historically relied on U.S. security guarantees to protect their sovereignty. Realist theory suggests that states seek to diversify their alliances to reduce dependence on any single power as the U.S. becomes less reliable. The UAE, for example, has proactively pursued new security partnerships with countries such as France, India, and Russia, alongside strengthening ties with Israel through the Abraham Accords. These efforts reflect a strategic move to balance their security interests by minimizing reliance on the U.S. and hedging against future shifts in global power dynamics.

Realism posits that states adjust their strategies in response to changes in the international balance of power. In the Gulf region, the decline of U.S. influence and the rise of China and Russia as regional and global players have prompted the GCC states to rethink their security policies. The UAE, in particular, has sought to expand its security alliances by building closer relations with China, Russia, and other emerging powers. Guzzini (2024) argues that international relations' realist tradition is trapped in two core dilemmas: balancing distinctiveness and explanatory precision and reconciling traditional practical knowledge with scientific credibility.

This diversification of alliances directly applies the realist principle of security maximization. By seeking new partnerships, GCC states aim to reduce their vulnerability to U.S. foreign policy changes and enhance their strategic autonomy. Such diversification provides alternative security guarantees and positions the UAE to navigate the evolving international system better. While the UAE has aggressively diversified its security alliances, other GCC states like Kuwait have adopted a more cautious approach. Kuwait has historically relied heavily on U.S. security guarantees, mainly due to its geographic vulnerabilities and historical reliance on U.S. military support during conflicts like the Gulf War. However, Kuwait's increasing awareness of the changing regional dynamics has led it to explore new partnerships while maintaining its relationship with the U.S. (Mansour & Ahmed, 2024).

This balancing act reflects the realist principle of flexibility. According to realist theory, states continuously reassess their alliances to adapt to shifting power structures. In the case of Kuwait, while the U.S. remains an important security partner, the state is gradually seeking greater autonomy by exploring new alliances. This approach underscores strategic diversification's importance in reducing vulnerability and ensuring security in an uncertain world order since realist theory emphasizes that states seek to maximize their power and minimize external influence over their strategic decisions (Elkahlout & Hedaya, 2024).

Pursuing strategic autonomy is a key objective for the GCC states. By diversifying their security alliances, Gulf states are enhancing their independence and reducing dependence on the U.S. This shift reflects the realist desire to maintain

flexibility in changing power dynamics and avoid over-reliance on any single actor (Milton-Edwards, 2024). For example, The efforts to cultivate relationships with global powers such as Russia and China, alongside regional partnerships with Israel, exemplify this pursuit of strategic autonomy. These new alliances provide GCC countries with alternative security sources and reduce vulnerability to the shifting priorities of the U.S. In doing so, they maximize their strategic options and enhance the ability to safeguard national interests in a rapidly changing global environment.

According to realism, great powers like the U.S. maintain significant control over smaller states due to their superior military, economic, and political capabilities. Gulf states' reliance on U.S. security guarantees reflects the realist view that weaker states align with stronger powers to ensure survival (Asal & Kratoville, 2013). The 2017 Riyadh summit exemplified how smaller GCC states accepted subordination to the U.S. in exchange for protection from regional threats. This underscores the realist notion that states often enter into alliances that subordinate specific interests for survival (Schumacher, 2017).

The Gulf Crisis (2017–2021) offers a poignant example of how smaller GCC states, such as Qatar, maneuver within the realist framework. Faced with sanctions from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, Qatar leveraged its relationship with the U.S. by expanding the al-Udeid airbase to assert its sovereignty and maintain regional legitimacy. El Taki (2024) highlights how these sanctions functioned as norm enforcement mechanisms, compelling Qatar to align with hegemonic norms to ensure its survival. This episode further emphasizes how realist principles of power and security continue to shape GCC foreign policies amid shifting alliances. Nevertheless, despite the shifting dynamics of U.S. influence in the region, the realist perspective argues that the power differential between the U.S. and the GCC states remains central to shaping Gulf states' foreign policy. Anarchy and Survival: In the anarchic international system, states are primarily concerned with survival. Despite power imbalances, Gulf states' alignment with the U.S. reflects their strategic calculations to ensure security in a turbulent regional environment.

STRATEGIC RECALIBRATION AND THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The Abraham Accords underscore a transformative shift in regional alliances as Gulf states recalibrate their strategies to address evolving security priorities. This shift emulates the realist assertion that states adjust their behavior in response to changing threats and opportunities (Madani, 2024). The Accords represent a pragmatic re-evaluation of regional dynamics, driven by the survival instincts of Gulf states and their desire to maximize influence. However, the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict challenges these strategic recalibrations, revealing the tension between Gulf states' pursuit of self-interest and broader peace-building goals. In a realist framework, where security and survival are paramount, these competing priorities emphasize the delicate balance between pragmatic security concerns and long-term regional stability. Olson et al. (2024) explain that in the Middle East, Israel's integration and its relations with neighboring Arab states are framed around broader geopolitical considerations.

In response to the perceived decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East, the GCC states have adapted differently. Parker and Bakir (2024) noted that the UAE proactively sought to diversify its alliances to reduce reliance on U.S. security guarantees. Meanwhile, Kuwait continues to maintain a strong dependence on Washington. These divergent strategies reflect the realist focus on power and security,

with states adjusting their foreign policies to navigate an increasingly complex and anarchic international system. Navot et al. (2023) further emphasize the role of identity and material needs in shaping political strategies, illustrating how power-driven approaches dominate the geopolitical landscape amid the rise of influential non-state actors.

Saudi Arabia's evolving stance toward Israel provides another key dimension to the realist analysis. Historically driven by Arab nationalist and Islamic identity, Saudi policy has gradually shifted to incorporate more pragmatic considerations, particularly in balancing regional threats from Iran and pursuing economic modernization goals. As Janardhan (2022) observes, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy increasingly integrates elements of liberalism, focusing on economic interdependence with global powers like the U.S. and China while pursuing strategic partnerships, including normalization with Israel. Despite these liberal shifts, Saudi policy remains grounded in realist survival and regional power dynamics calculations, as evidenced by China's mediation of the Iran-Saudi rivalry.

The Abraham Accords further highlight the GCC's realist-driven recalibration. Gulf states have prioritized alliances with Israel to counter regional threats, particularly from Iran, while simultaneously fostering economic ties (Hitman & Naor, 2024). However, as Madani (2024) notes, these alliances remain fragile in the face of enduring regional conflicts, such as the Israel-Gaza crisis, underscoring the transient nature of partnerships built on shifting power dynamics. These strategic adjustments illustrate the broader GCC approach to navigating the relative decline of U.S. influence and the rise of alternative power centers.

The U.S.-GCC relationship reflects power asymmetry and hierarchy within the realist framework. As Saleh (2024) notes, realism stresses great powers' dominance and smaller states' subordination. The U.S., as a global hegemon, has leveraged its superior military and economic capabilities to maintain influence over the GCC, primarily through its control of critical resources like oil and its provision of security guarantees. The behavior of the GCC states in balancing between rival powers reflects several key assumptions of realist theory. The Gulf states operate in an international system where no central authority guarantees security, thus necessitating self-help strategies. The balancing act pursued by the GCC states ensures their protection and survival by preventing any one power from dominating the region. By engaging with multiple powers, including the U.S., China, Russia, and Iran, the GCC states maximize their economic and security benefits while minimizing the risks of being subjugated to one power. The strategic decisions made by the Gulf states are rational responses to shifting power dynamics, aiming to secure their survival, autonomy, and long-term prosperity.

Economic imperatives are increasingly influencing the foreign policies of GCC states as they seek to diversify away from oil dependence and secure their long-term economic security (Salman, 2024). This shift aligns with the realist view that national interests are central to a state's strength and security (Holtermann Entwistle & Plonski, 2024). In realist terms, the national interest is the primary driver of foreign policy, with security and power being its key components (Janardhan, 2022). The historical reliance on oil revenues has been central to the GCC states' economic power. However, as global energy markets shift and oil dependence becomes a potential vulnerability, the Gulf states increasingly focus on economic diversification. This shift ensures long-term economic security by reducing their exposure to the volatile oil market.

Realist theory asserts that economic power is integral to a state's strength. Through initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's global investments, the GCC states are actively working to diversify their economies away from oil. This economic diversification enhances their power and strategic autonomy, ensuring they are not vulnerable to external shocks in the energy sector. The GCC states are fortifying their long-term financial and security position by investing in various sectors, including technology, tourism, and infrastructure. The Abraham Accords illustrate how economic considerations influence GCC foreign policy. The accords are a means of security cooperation and an avenue for financial opportunities, including trade, technology exchange, and investment. These material interests align with the GCC states' broader strategy of economic diversification and maximizing their power and security.

Realism emphasizes that material interests, such as wealth and resources, drive foreign policy decisions. As the global balance of power evolves, the GCC states have adjusted their strategies to ensure survival and prosperity. The decline of oil dependence and the rise of new global powers have prompted the Gulf states to seek new economic and diplomatic partnerships) (Cerioli, 2024). This strategic realignment reflects the realist principle that states must continually adapt to changing global dynamics to maintain their power and security. In the anarchic international system described by realism, the GCC states' focus on economic diversification allows them to reduce reliance on oil, mitigate risks, and maintain their security and sovereignty in the face of external pressures.

NON-STATE INFLUENCE

The growing influence of non-state actors, particularly in conflicts like Israel-Gaza, challenges the stability of Gulf states' alliances and recalibrations. Non-state actors complicate traditional security calculations, as states must now factor in the influence of militias, terrorist groups, and other non-state forces alongside state actors like Iran and Israel. This shift in power dynamics suggests that realist frameworks must evolve to account for the changing nature of power and security threats in the Middle East. Realist theory must, therefore, expand to accommodate these new actors, acknowledging their growing impact on state behavior and regional stability. Although Perletta (2024) asserts that states are the primary actors, and their behaviors are driven by the need to ensure security and power in an uncertain world, Petrosyan (2023) explains that as non-state actors gain influence, regional states must adapt their strategies and recalibrate alliances.

The Israel-Gaza conflict exemplifies this, with non-state actors like Hamas playing a significant role in shaping regional power dynamics and security concerns. According to Thies (20020), these challenges are particularly relevant to the Middle East, where traditional realist approaches often oversimplify complex dynamics like identity, ideology, and the influence of non-state actors. Moving beyond classical realism can provide a more nuanced understanding of the region's shifting alliances, power struggles, and socio-political complexities. Divsallar and Azizi (2023) point out the growing importance of non-state actors in international relations, particularly in their diplomatic activities and foreign policy engagements. These actors, often operating in conflict zones like the Middle East, utilize political, military, economic, and ideological tools to advance their interests, challenging the traditional state-centric model. Realists view this development through the lens of power struggles, where state

and non-state actors compete for influence, with non-state actors increasingly engaging in diplomatic activities traditionally reserved for states.

The Gulf Cooperation Council navigates a complex and delicate balancing act in its foreign policy, managing relationships with rival global and regional powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and Iran. This balancing behavior can be understood through realist international relations theory, which emphasizes state behavior driven by security concerns and the desire for power maximization (Niblock et al., 2024). Realism demonstrates this, which provides a framework for analyzing how these states manage their security and autonomy while interacting with multiple powers. The theory argues that states operate in an anarchic international system where no overarching authority ensures security. In such an environment, states must secure their survival and independence by managing their relationships with competing powers. One central tenet of realist theory is the concept of balancing, where states seek to prevent any single actor from achieving dominance in their region or sphere of influence.

Balancing is essential for GCC states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE due to their strategic position between several powerful states. Each of these powers - the U.S., China, Russia, and Iran - has different regional interests. Aligning too closely with any of these powers could create vulnerabilities, exposing the Gulf states to pressure from others (Almezzaini, 2024). Through a realist approach, by balancing relationships with these powers, the GCC states maintain strategic autonomy, avoid over-reliance on a single actor, and retain the flexibility needed to adapt to shifting geopolitical conditions. This approach is a classic example of realist balancing, where states seek to preserve their independence and leverage in a competitive international system.

Realism also emphasizes that states act on their national interests, focusing primarily on security and survival. In the case of the GCC, this pragmatism is evident in how states make strategic decisions in response to external opportunities and threats. Saudi Arabia, for example, maintains strong defense ties with the United States to ensure military security against regional adversaries like Iran. Simultaneously, it diversifies its economic relationships by engaging in energy deals with China. This dual strategy allows Saudi Arabia to hedge its risks by diversifying its security and economic dependencies, ensuring long-term stability. Similarly, GCC countries deepen their ties with Russia and China while maintaining a security alliance with the U.S. Diversifying relationships ensures that they remain flexible in their foreign policy, avoiding the entrapment of choosing between conflicting powers.

These pragmatic decisions reflect the realist notion that states are rational actors, adjusting their strategies in response to an evolving international environment. The Gulf states strategically navigate these power dynamics to maximize their security and economic well-being, ensuring they are not vulnerable to a single power's shifting priorities or interests (Elayah & Al-Awami, 2024). A central issue of realism is the importance of avoiding over-reliance on any one state, as excessive dependence can lead to vulnerability. States must maintain their autonomy and ensure they are not exposed to risks if the interests of their primary ally shift. Given the changing dynamics of U.S. involvement in the region, this is particularly important for the GCC. Although the U.S. has historically been a key security partner for the Gulf states, the evolving strategic recalibrations of U.S. foreign policy have prompted the GCC to pursue diversified alliances. These states have engaged with China for economic opportunities and Russia for political and military options, thus reducing their dependence on the U.S. and

ensuring a more balanced set of relationships. The GCC's efforts to avoid over-reliance on any one external actor align with the realist principle that states must maintain flexibility and strategic autonomy to safeguard their long-term interests.

REALISM'S CORE ASSUMPTIONS IN ACTION

Conclusion

The GCC's foreign policy behavior, balancing rival global and regional powers and emphasizing economic diversification, aligns with core realist principles of power maximization, strategic pragmatism, and self-help. The GCC states enhance their security, autonomy, and influence in a rapidly changing global order by maintaining flexible relationships with multiple powers and pursuing economic diversification. These strategies reflect the realist view that states act primarily in their national interest, prioritizing security and control while navigating an increasingly multipolar world.

The strategic diversification efforts of GCC states, particularly in reducing their dependence on the U.S., reflect core principles of realist theory. Realist theory suggests that states act primarily in their self-interest to maximize their security and minimize vulnerabilities in an anarchic international system. As U.S. influence in the Middle East declines, the GCC states have increasingly sought to diversify their security alliances, forging new relationships with countries like China, Russia, and Israel. These efforts align with realist concepts of self-help, security maximization, and power balancing.

The Gulf states' move towards strategic autonomy directly responds to shifting power dynamics and the perceived decline of U.S. influence. Through strategic diversification, they aim to ensure their survival and sovereignty by reducing dependence on any single power. This shift underscores the dynamic nature of state behavior in the international system. It highlights the realist belief that states continuously adapt their strategies to safeguard their national interests in an ever-changing world order.

The analysis underscores the power asymmetry inherent in U.S.-GCC relations, a core tenet of realism. The U.S., as a global hegemon, has historically exerted significant influence over smaller Gulf states, particularly by leveraging its military and economic power to secure alliances. The 2017 Riyadh summit exemplified this dynamic, where smaller GCC states subordinated their interests to the U.S. in exchange for security assurances. Despite the declining U.S. influence in the region, the power differential remains central to Gulf states' foreign policy decisions, reinforcing the realist perspective of great powers' dominance over smaller states.

The rise of non-state actors in the Middle East necessitates expanding the realist framework. While traditional realism emphasizes state-centric interactions, the increasing prominence of non-state actors requires a more nuanced approach to understanding power dynamics and security threats. This evolving framework will better capture the complexities of the contemporary Middle East, where state and non-state actors contribute to shaping geopolitical outcomes.

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