

GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

Cohesion, Conflicts and
Engagement with External Powers

PRASANTA KUMAR PRADHAN

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Prasanta Kumar Pradhan



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Preface

Since its inception in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been a symbol of unity in the turbulent West Asian region. Established in the backdrop of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War that started in 1980, the GCC brought all the six Gulf Arab Sheikhdoms – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – together. The Gulf region to remained tense as the Iran-Iraq War continued till 1988 and then the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took place in 1990. These shared security threats and mutual perceptions of vulnerability played an important role in maintaining the cohesion of the organisation during its formative years.

Economic integration has been a principal objective of the GCC since its inception. Considerable progress has been achieved in this regard, particularly in promoting trade and economic interdependence among the member states. The economies of the GCC countries remain heavily reliant on the oil and gas sector, while diversification into non-hydrocarbon sectors has historically lagged behind. Collectively, the GCC is among the world's largest producers and exporters of hydrocarbons, with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE ranking among the leading oil producers globally, and Qatar emerging as a key supplier of natural gas.

In pursuit of deeper integration, the GCC established a Free Trade Area in 1983 to promote intra-regional trade and remove barriers. This was followed in 2003 by the creation of a Customs Union, designed to harmonise external trade policies, coordinate import and export regulations, and eliminate tariff and non-tariff restrictions, thereby facilitating greater trade flows within the bloc. In 2008, the GCC further advanced this process by announcing the formation of a Common Market, aimed at enabling the free movement of

goods, services, capital and labour. However, despite these initiatives, persistent disagreements among member states on critical political and economic issues have constrained the pace of deeper integration within the organisation.

Over time, and in response to shifting regional geopolitics, the threat perceptions of individual GCC states have evolved considerably. Iran has remained the foremost security challenge for the GCC, shaping much of its collective and national security outlooks. By contrast, Iraq's position as a regional challenge has been significantly diminished in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion. Nevertheless, the Iranian nuclear programme continues to represent a significant challenge for the GCC, given its potential implications for regional stability and security.

The beginning of the Arab uprisings in December 2010 brought fresh challenges for the GCC. The rise of ISIS, the emergence of political Islam in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda in Egypt and Tunisia, and the protracted civil wars in Syria and Yemen not only brought security challenges for the GCC but also resulted in disagreements among the member states of the organisation.

The boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt in June 2017 was the lowest point in the unity of the organisation. The Qatar crisis challenged the unity and relevance of the GCC as a credible regional organisation. Although Qatar was brought back to the GCC at the Al Ula Summit in 2021, the differences continue to persist among the member states of the organisation on different issues.

Historically, the crises in the region have always attracted external players to the Gulf. The US has remained the most dominant player in the region with its military deployed in all the GCC states. Russia is trying hard to play a role in regional security in the Gulf and also eyeing the lucrative arms market in the region. China with its heavy energy dependence on the Gulf countries and its newfound Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is deeply engaged with all the GCC member states economically.

India has huge political, economic, energy and security interests with the GCC countries. The nine million strong Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf form a natural link with the region. While India has maintained

momentum in its engagement with the GCC countries even during the difficult period of Arab uprisings, it has maintained its traditional policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of the individual member states or the GCC as a collective.

The GCC states have pursued engagement with external powers through both bilateral and collective frameworks. While the GCC as a bloc has relied on the American security umbrella in the Gulf region, individual member states have also cultivated extensive bilateral defence and security partnerships with Washington. Simultaneously, the GCC countries have collaborated with Russia within the OPEC Plus framework to regulate oil production levels and stabilise global energy prices. Their engagement with China has expanded, encompassing robust energy and trade ties as well as participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, which has deepened infrastructural and economic linkages. Relations with India have also grown considerably, extending beyond traditional domains of energy and trade to encompass defence and security cooperation, where mutual interests increasingly converge. In recent years, this multidimensional engagement has been institutionalised through the establishment of strategic partnership agreements, reflecting the growing recognition of India as a key partner in the region.

Against this backdrop, this study contends that the GCC, over the course of its 45 years of existence, has undergone significant transformations. Persistent instability in the Gulf region has profoundly influenced the foreign policy orientations of its member states. The Arab uprisings, in particular, had a destabilising effect on the unity and relevance of the organisation, exposing deep divisions within the bloc. Divergent perceptions among member states regarding the geopolitical landscape and regional security in the Gulf have further complicated efforts to maintain unity. Moreover, the GCC's strategies toward major external powers have been shaped by evolving political and security imperatives in the West Asian region.

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Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

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The GCC in Context: Integration Amid Uncertainty

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981 by six Arab Gulf states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – as a regional organisation aimed at fostering greater political, economic and security cooperation. Its formation was prompted by a series of significant geopolitical turbulences in the region that heightened insecurity and underscored the need for collective action among the Gulf monarchies. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which led to the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, introduced a new political and ideological challenge. Khomeini's call to export the revolution and his appeal to the Gulf Arab populations to rise against their governments generated considerable anxiety across the Gulf capitals. The revolutionary government in Iran completely changed the politics, governance and foreign policy of the country, and its attitude towards the neighbouring countries changed drastically. The same year witnessed the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, an event that reshaped regional geopolitics and reverberated globally. In 1980, the eruption of the Iran–Iraq War further exacerbated regional instability, with the prospect of a protracted conflict between two major neighbouring states raising alarm among the smaller Gulf Sheikdoms. The Iran–Iraq War continued till 1988, and the Russian intervention in Afghanistan ended in 1989. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought further instability to the region. These developments – each

with long-term ramifications for the political and security landscape of West Asia – collectively catalysed the formation of the GCC. The establishment of the GCC was a strategic response by the Gulf Arab states to safeguard their national interest, promote cooperation among themselves and coordinate their regional security policies in the face of mounting external threats.

Given the turbulent political and security environment in which the GCC was established, the early years of the organisation were marked by a strong sense of unity and understanding among its member states. The founding leaders of the GCC were committed to fostering cooperation and maintaining an atmosphere of understanding, particularly on matters related to foreign policy and regional security. While recognising the presence of political and strategic differences among them, the member states agreed to prioritise collective interests and confront shared regional challenges.¹ This spirit of consensus and pragmatism was instrumental in ensuring the continuity and relative success of the GCC over the past four decades, despite intermittent tensions and divergences over foreign policy and security issues. The common characteristics of the member states – including their monarchical political systems, hydrocarbon-based economies and similar threat perceptions – further reinforced their sense of unity and solidarity. Moreover, their geographic proximity and common political, economic and security challenges contributed to the belief in a common destiny, which underpinned their commitment to cooperation.

The GCC has been a symbol of unity in the turbulent West Asian region. Since its inception, the organisation has many achievements to its credit covering a wide range of economic, political and security issues among its members. The founding charter of the GCC emphasised on integration and interconnection of economies, education and culture among the members. Over the last 45 years of the GCC's existence, cooperation among its members has expanded to several fields, and the grouping has steadily emerged as a powerful regional bloc in the West Asia. Though the charter of the organisation did not mention cooperation on security issues, subsequent official communiqués have recognised this as an important area of cooperation. The GCC also established a joint military arm known as the 'Peninsula Shield Force' in 1984, which is intended to deter and respond to security threats faced by member states.

Political Cooperation

The similar nature of political systems among all the GCC countries has been the most important common factor in bringing them together. Their common Islamic and Arab identity, shared history, culture, values and geographical contiguity have been the factors that have kept them united. Islam has been the principal element of the foreign policy of all the GCC countries. All of them have been members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League. The GCC countries have a monarchical political system, which is highly centralised and authoritarian and has minimal people's participation in the state's decision-making. Their internal governing structures are also similar; they maintain their tribal identity, religion, culture and function on a network of tribal and familial loyalties. As a result, the modern representational democracy has not taken root in the Gulf Sheikdoms. They also have a tendency to maintain a strong military, police and intelligence system to keep a check on any opposition or dissident activities planned against the regime. All the GCC countries are united to preserve and prolong the political and tribal system of governance.

In order to prolong the authoritarian system of governance, the GCC monarchies have adopted a number of welfare measures and a variety of social security programmes. By dint of the huge amount of rent they receive from the energy sector, they have been able to distribute the wealth among the citizens. All these countries have been maintaining an unwritten social contract with their citizens. The citizens have a minimal role in the decision-making in the country, and, at the same time, the State takes care of the social and economic needs of the citizens with a distribution network to share the national wealth with its people. Their rentier economy has helped them to continue with their populist and welfare measures. There have been instances of dissident and opposition voices to the regimes in the GCC, but they have often been dealt with a heavy hand. The State has also co-opted a large number of dissidents and political opposition figures. Some of the dissident leaders are jailed, and some others are living in forced exile. All the GCC countries have a poor human rights record with frequent violations of the rights of minorities, restricting the freedom and rights of women and suppressing the voice of the dissidents. The call for improving human rights conditions in these countries has also been suppressed coercively by the regimes.

The common desire of all the GCC countries to maintain their regime security is another important driver for unity among the GCC countries. Starting from the initial threat from Ayatollah Khomeini to export his brand of revolution to the GCC countries and Saddam Hussein's declaration that the Gulf monarchies are illegitimate, the quest among the GCC countries to support each other in case of a threat to the regime has been an important aspect of their cooperation. Further, the continuing wars and turbulences in the Gulf and the wider West Asian region have also consolidated their commitment towards each other's regime security for decades. During the last decade, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the GCC monarchies have learnt the lesson of the importance of maintaining close cooperation among each other in case of a challenge to a regime. The domino effect of the fall of one regime on the others during the Arab unrest is a wake-up call for all the Gulf monarchies.

Economic Integration

Economic integration has moved at a higher pace than the political and military integration among the GCC states. Differences over the political, security and military issues have been visible, while they have agreed on most aspects of economic integration, as it gave them immediate economic dividends. The GCC countries are among the world's largest oil and gas producers. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE are among the other largest oil producers in the world. Qatar is a major player in the supply of natural gas. All the GCC countries are members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) except Qatar, which withdrew from the organisation in the aftermath of the Qatar crisis of 2017. They are being called 'rentier states' as they are heavily dependent on the rent accrued from selling oil and gas. The economy of the GCC states mostly revolves around the oil and gas sector, and other sectors of the economy have lagged for decades. In recent years, there has been an effort from these countries to diversify their economy beyond the traditionally dominant energy sector.² The similar nature of their economies removes a lot of natural barriers to economic integration, and, thus, they have found it beneficial to integrate their economies.

Establishing a GCC free trade area was one of the main provisions of the Economic Agreement signed by the GCC in November 1981. The objective

of creating a free trade area was to promote and facilitate trade and eliminate existing trade barriers among the countries. As a result of the agreement, the GCC free trade area came into existence in March 1983, which further promoted and integrated intra-GCC trade by exempting customs duties. The free trade area continued till 2002, and it was replaced by a GCC Customs Union which came into being in 2003. According to the GCC, the establishment of the free trade area further facilitated trade, and the intra-GCC trade volume increased from US\$6 billion in 1983 to around US\$20 billion in 2002.³ The GCC Customs Union was started in 2003. It is intended to further integrate their economies, coordinate the export and import policies of the member states, and eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers to further enhance the intra-GCC trade flow. The GCC believes that the intra-GCC trade has witnessed substantial growth in the aftermath of the establishment of the Customs Union.

In 2008, the GCC announced the formation of a Common Market. It intends to achieve 'economic citizenship' – equal treatment of all the citizens of all the member states in all economic fields.⁴ Article 3 of the Economic Agreement signed by the GCC countries specifies ten important areas of cooperation, including the movement of people, social security, employment and investment for the implementation of the GCC Common Market.⁵

Integrating their economies has been one of the principal objectives of the GCC. However, despite all these efforts, their economic integration has lagged behind the original expectation and target. Incompatible development strategies of the member states and the fear of loss of their national sovereignty after the economic integration are some of the key factors responsible for the slow pace of economic integration among the GCC countries.⁶ Chapter three of the Economic Agreement of 2001 proposes to establish an economic and monetary union of the GCC, including establishing a common currency and harmonising the economic and fiscal policies of all the member states. Though there have been a lot of deliberations over these issues, no consensus has emerged till now.

There are disagreements among the member states over the other key issues among the member states which have inhibited further integration in the organisation. The UAE withdrew from the GCC Monetary Union in

2009 as it wanted to host the GCC Central Bank, which was later shifted to Riyadh.⁷ Earlier, in 2006, Oman had withdrawn from the GCC Monetary Union. Similarly, in 2013, Oman raised its disagreement with the proposal to establish the Gulf Union. Oman's Foreign Affairs Minister, Yousuf Bin Alawi Bin Abdullah, stated that 'We didn't want to lose our own identity for the sake of the Gulf Union'.⁸

Evolving Perception of the Members towards the Organisation

All the individual GCC countries emphasise their relationship with the member states. But they have differed on specific issues that have created differences among them in the organisation. During the initial years following the formation of the GCC, their cooperation on political and security issues was at its highest; but in the subsequent years, differences emerged among them over regional security because of the changing geopolitical reality and the changing perception of the individual countries towards regional security. Economic Cooperation and integration have been given priority by the member states; therefore, it has moved faster than other areas of cooperation, although they could have moved faster and in a more effective manner. There has been continuity and change in the approach of the GCC member states towards organisational unity.

Saudi Arabia has been the main protagonist in the formation of the GCC. It has played a key role in bringing all other countries together on board in the backdrop of the turbulent geopolitics of the late 1970s in the Gulf region. The Kingdom has consistently nurtured its ambition to play a leadership role not only in the Gulf region but also in the broader Arab and Islamic world. Therefore, it has sought the critical support of the GCC countries against the bigger neighbours such as Iran and Iraq. Saudi Arabia played the most crucial role in the formation of the GCC, and this was the most crucial diplomatic initiative taken by Saudi Arabia since the formation of the OIC, leaving out Iran and Iraq.⁹ Throughout the course of the Iran–Iraq War, all the GCC countries remained united and supported Iraq against Iran.

In the last four decades of the existence of the GCC, Saudi Arabia has played a dominant role in the GCC. It has been leading many initiatives and has hosted the headquarters of the organisation as well as the GCC Central

Bank. Saudi Arabia is the largest GCC country in terms of size, population, economy and political influence. This has brought a sense of apprehension in the minds of some of the smaller member states that full integration might lead to excessive Saudi dominance in the organisation. For Saudi Arabia, its engagement with the other GCC states is an important priority. Saudi Arabia believes that a strong GCC is not only in its national interest but also contributes to peace and stability in the Gulf region. This has been the constant Saudi position over the last four decades. In the face of every crisis and war the GCC has faced since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has called for more and more cohesion and integration among the member states, not only to overcome the common challenges but also for mutual development and prosperity as well.

Like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain has always wanted a strong and united GCC. Bahrain's primary security challenges stem from the growing Iranian threat to its internal and external security. Bahrain's delicate demographics remain a sensitive issue for the rulers. Bahrain is the only Shia-majority country in the GCC ruled by a Sunni royal family. It has accused Iran of interfering in its internal affairs by supporting some Shia extremist elements and creating instability in the country. Bahraini authorities have claimed to have busted several terror cells linked to Iran. In 1981, there was a failed coup attempt against the Bahraini ruler orchestrated by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) – a Shia militant group.¹⁰ The Bahraini Government alleged that the IFLB was backed by Iran in order to topple the Al Khalifa regime. Iran rejected the Bahraini allegations of its involvement in the coup attempt, but the Bahraini Government was convinced of Iranian support for the IFLB. Till 1970, Iran claimed Bahrain to be a part of its territory until the Shah of Iran dropped that claim. Thus, Bahrain has always felt threatened by Iran for its intention and ability to create sectarian tension and terrorism in the country.

Security and stability in the Gulf region are of utmost importance for Bahrain, and therefore, it has supported further military integration of all the GCC countries. As a small island country having only connectivity with Saudi Arabia through the King Fahd Causeway, Bahrain's relationship with Saudi Arabia has been traditionally strong. Within the GCC, Bahrain has remained a trusted ally of Saudi Arabia. Bahrain has actively participated in the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen against the Houthis. It has also

participated in the anti-terror operations of the GCC and has joined the international efforts in combating maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Bahrain has been a member of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) led by Saudi Arabia to fight terrorism and hosts the Gulf Unified Maritime Operations Centre, a joint command of the maritime forces of the GCC countries established in 2016, to address the maritime challenges emerging in the Gulf region. Besides, Bahrain has been hosting the US Navy's fifth fleet in Manama and signed a maritime facilitation agreement with the UK in 2014 leading to the establishment of a British naval support facility at the Mina Salman Port in the Kingdom in 2018.¹¹

Besides, Bahrain is the smallest economy in the GCC and has faced economic crises as well during the low oil prices. Therefore, Bahrain has supported the initiatives for economic integration in the GCC and has urged further integration of the GCC economies. Among all the GCC countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the top trading partners of Bahrain. Bahrain believes that the establishment of the GCC free trade area and the GCC common market has been beneficial to Bahrain's economy in multiple sectors.

The UAE has been a committed member of the GCC. In the early 1980s, the UAE perceived Iraq as a major threat in the region. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait further consolidated the Iraqi threat perception.¹² But in the aftermath of the war, Iraq has been substantially weakened and, thus, the UAE does not perceive it as a major security challenge. From the beginning, the UAE has believed that Iran is the biggest threat to its national security. The UAE looked at the revolutionary regime of Iran as an expansionist and hegemonic power in the Gulf region. Iran's strengthening of its military and its involvement in subversive and terrorist activities in the Gulf Arab countries increased Emirati suspicion over the Iranian intentions in the region. In the aftermath of the Arab unrest, Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen and the Assad regime in Syria has further consolidated the UAE's perception of Iran as a threat to the region's stability. It believes that a united GCC is in the interest of all the member states facing the Iran threat. The common challenge posed by terrorism to all the countries of the region has also made the UAE call for a stronger GCC to counter the menace. It has also participated in the GCC initiatives and efforts in Yemen and Bahrain and has been active in the conflict hotspots such as Syria and Libya as well.¹³ The UAE is one of the flourishing economies

in the region. The UAE has been diversifying its economy with strategies such as promoting foreign direct investment, tourism, manufacturing and research and development.¹⁴ Dubai has emerged as one of the leading international trading hubs. Thus, for security and economic reasons, the UAE has always supported a strong and united GCC.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar has emerged as an outlier in the GCC. It has adopted an independent foreign policy, and on a number of occasions, Qatar has been found to have adopted a nonconformist approach towards the organisation. During the initial years of the formation of the GCC, Qatar, under its ruler, Amir Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani, believed that a united GCC is in the interest of all the member states. But trouble started in 1995 when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani deposed him from power and acceded to the throne. Sheikh Hamad's regional policies were seen to be not aligning with the policies of other member states of the GCC. A failed coup attempt to remove him from power further hardened his thinking and approach towards regional security. Qatar has faced a security dilemma between two of its big neighbours – Iran and Saudi Arabia – who are desirous of its support. While Qatar believed that Iran was an expansionist power in the region, the Saudi attack and capture of the Qatari Al Khufos Border Crossing in 1992 deepened Qatar's fears of Saudi Arabia. Thus, Qatar had to adopt neutral and autonomous strategies to deal with two big neighbours and devise its national and regional security policies.

Driven by huge wealth accrued by the export of natural gas and an ambition to play a role in regional and world politics, Qatar has been undeterred in forming its policies, even though it has irritated its Gulf Arab neighbours. Starting from the mid-2000s, Qatar undertook a number of mediation efforts in the regional conflicts in West Asia and Africa. Qatar's mediation initiative was intended to position itself as a neutral peacemaker and contribute to resolving the ongoing regional crises.¹⁵ It mediated in regional conflicts prominently in Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Palestine and in the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute. By undertaking mediation in the regional conflicts, Qatar intended to expand its influence in the region and, at the same time, replace Saudi Arabia, which has traditionally been the peace broker in the conflicts in the region.¹⁶ Qatar's growing regional profile created insecurity in Riyadh,

and Qatar was increasingly believed not to be cooperating with the GCC in matters of regional peace and stability. As a result, the Saudi-Qatari relationship was negatively affected. Besides, Qatar's satellite network *Al Jazeera* has also been accused of running anti-Saudi propaganda content, which has further irritated the Saudi rulers. Since Hamad took over the reins of the country and pursued autonomy in his foreign and security policies, Saudi-Qatari relations were negatively affected.¹⁷ The course of events in the aftermath of the Arab unrest, when Qatar tried to capitalise on the unfolding events in the region and maximise its gains, further worsened the relationship between the two, which resulted in the boycott of Qatar in June 2017.¹⁸

Also, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to their security, Qatar has provided them generous support as it believes that the group is an asset for its regional ambitions. Qatari financial and political support for the Muslim Brotherhood was perceived as a compromise of regional security in the Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This policy of Qatar, though intended to further expand its influence in the region using the Muslim Brotherhood, created severe differences in the organisation. Besides Qatar's active role in the conflict zones like Syria, Libya and Egypt made other GCC countries think about Qatar's long-term objectives and strategies in the region. This made them realise that Qatar's policies need to be aligned closely with the policies of other GCC member states over issues of regional security and stability.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar's perception of the Iranian threat has undergone a sea change in the past few decades. Qatar has engaged with Iran and does not believe that Iran poses a threat to its national or regional security. There is a strong economic reason for this change in perception. Qatar and Iran share the largest gas field in the Persian Gulf – the North Dome/South Pars gas field. There have been disputes over this gas field as Qatar has accused Iran of pilfering gas from the field. Qatar, therefore, finds it prudent to engage with Iran over the issue. This has also resulted in huge differences in the GCC.

The Omani foreign policy has always tried to balance its relationship with all the neighbouring countries as well as external powers without supporting one against the other. Oman, like its neighbours, has emphasised

strengthening relationships with the GCC countries. It follows an independent foreign policy while being active in the organisation. From the beginning, Oman was concerned about the security of each of the member states of the GCC. In the GCC summit meetings, Oman has argued for greater coordination on security and defence issues among the member states of the GCC.¹⁹ As it is located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, fighting maritime piracy and terrorism has been its major security concern. Oman does not believe that Iran poses any serious threat to regional security in the Gulf; rather, it believes that a stable Iran is favourable for maintaining peace and stability in the region.²⁰ It supports dialogue and negotiation with Iran in order to restore peace and stability in the Gulf. In an interview in 1997, Qaboos bin Said Al Said, the Sultan of Oman, stated that 'Nations should be talking to one another. Iran is the largest country in the Gulf, with 65 million people. You cannot isolate it'.²¹ This statement reflected his approach towards Iran, and after all the turbulences in the region, Oman continues with this position. Oman's role as a facilitator in the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 is a reflection of its neutrality over the issue of Iran. It played a key role in hosting the Iranian nuclear talks at a time when other GCC member states were nervous about the possible implications of the deal for the region. Oman held the view that, as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has the right to have a peaceful nuclear programme.²² Oman is the only GCC country that did not withdraw its envoy from Iran in 2014. It is also the only Gulf country that did not participate in the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance. Oman's independent foreign policy and its approach towards Iran, therefore, have sometimes caused tensions in the GCC as well.²³ As Donald Trump resumed office for the second term, Oman once again engaged in mediating the indirect talks between the US and Iran in 2025. It has been working as the mediator and has been hosting the talks in Muscat and its embassy in Rome.

Kuwait has maintained a balanced foreign policy in the region. Non-interference in the internal matters of other countries and maintaining friendly relationships with neighbouring countries are important foreign policy principles of the country. Strengthening the GCC is one of the stated foreign-policy goals of Kuwait.²⁴ Kuwait has always contended that the unity of the organisation should be maintained for mutual progress and security. Kuwait perceived both Iran and Iraq as threats to its national security. During the

Iraqi invasion in 1990, Kuwait received support from its GCC neighbours. Like other GCC states, Kuwait is also worried about the Iranian nuclear programme and its security and environmental implications for the region. Kuwait's approach towards the GCC as a credible regional organisation has remained constant without any drastic change.

Kuwait has been a mediator in the regional crises. It played a key role in resolving the GCC crisis in 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their envoys from Qatar, alleging that it compromised regional security and stability in the Gulf region. Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah played an active mediatory role in resolving the crisis. Again, after the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain in 2017, Kuwait, along with Oman, also came out to mediate and bring the crisis to an end. The Qatar crisis came to end at the Al Ula Summit of the GCC in January 2021, but Al Sabah passed away few months before in September 2020.

A number of factors have shaped the Kuwaiti foreign policy thinking in the region. Kuwait's strategic vulnerability of being a small state sandwiched between two big neighbours like Saudi Arabia and Iraq has historically had a huge impact on the Kuwaiti thinking on regional security.²⁵ The Iraqi invasion of the country further reinforced its idea of a stronger and united GCC for collective security in the Gulf region. Although all the GCC countries came to Kuwait's aid to fight against the Iraqi invasion, their military prowess against Iraq was found insufficient. The GCC's Peninsula Shield Force was deployed in Kuwait against the Iraqi invasion, but the force was unable to face the Iraqi aggression. After the war was over, Kuwait's then First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad expressed displeasure, stating that 'GCC had achieved a lot, but not as much as we would have wished. We were not completely satisfied, but we had achieved fifty per cent and, God willing, the other fifty per cent would be achieved in the future.'²⁶ Kuwait, therefore, has sought greater cooperation on defence and security issues among the member states, but it could not be achieved due to the existence of internal conflicts among the member states, including unresolved border disputes. The war also shaped the non-interventionist and moderate foreign policy approach in the region, emphasising negotiation and mutual resolution of the conflicts.

GCC and Regional Balance of Power in the Gulf

During the late 1970s, Iran and Iraq were the two most dominant players in the Gulf region. With the increase in oil prices, Saudi Arabia gradually strengthened its economic power and political clout in the region. Other Gulf countries were newly formed or lacked the power to challenge the existing influence of Iran and Iraq. The foreign policy of the US towards the region was to contain the power of these two countries, as it wanted to maintain a balance of power in the region by not allowing one of these two to become too dominant to shape the course of developments and challenge the US dominance in the Gulf.

By the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, both countries were substantially weakened economically, and their political and economic situation were severely impaired. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought further instability to the region. The GCC countries came together to support Kuwait against Saddam Hussein's invasion. The entry of the US military into the war and the beginning of Operation Desert Shield in August 1990 changed the whole scenario. The relationship between the US and the GCC countries got a significant boost with the deployment of the US military in the Gulf Arab countries to evict Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait. By the time the war ended, Iraq was a substantially weakened regional power, and Saddam Hussein had brought himself the label of an aggressor, which damaged his credibility as a regional leader. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent execution of Saddam Hussein severely damaged the economy, internal stability and political cohesion of the country.

Iran, which was economically weakened after the war with Iraq, got into further trouble after the controversy over its nuclear programme started in 2003. The nuclear controversy made Iran a pariah state in the world as the US, Europe and the Arab countries, as well as Israel, came together against the Iranian regime, stating that a nuclear Iran would be dangerous for regional peace and security. The situation in Iraq continued to deteriorate in the aftermath of the American invasion. The years that followed witnessed an increase in terrorism, internal instability, weak central authority, a rise of local militias and internal displacement in the country. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the aftermath of the Arab unrest, carving out

territories from Iraq and Syria, further affected Iraq's political stability and economy. The political leadership that followed failed to hold the country together and thus failed to restore peace and stability in the country. Iraq still continues to struggle with these issues after two decades of the American invasion of the country and the execution of Saddam Hussein. On the other hand, the Islamic regime in Iran has, to a large extent, been successful in maintaining peace and order in the country. The Iranian economy has suffered badly because of the imposition of Western sanctions due to its controversial nuclear programme. But despite the sanctions, Iran has shown resilience, and its relations with other countries in its neighbourhood and big powers like Russia and China have helped it significantly to face the economic challenges. Iran has continued to strengthen its military, and it is one of the strongest militaries in the region. In the aftermath of the execution of Saddam Hussein, political power came into the hands of the Shia-majority parties. Iran established good connections with the Shiite political parties and cultivated them politically. As a result, Iran's relationship with Iraq witnessed a sea change, and Iran's influence in Iraqi politics increased sharply.

As Iran and Iraq weakened, these years witnessed the emergence of the GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar as important economic and political power centres in the region. Fuelled by the huge wealth accrued from energy exports, these countries have increasingly played a significant role in regional geopolitics and security. The strong economic, political and security partnership with the US and the European and Asian countries has further added to the GCC countries' power and influence. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, in particular, have emerged as important political and economic power centres in the region during the last two decades. The relationship between Iran and the GCC as a collective remains the most important aspect of the balance of power in the Gulf region. Both have remained two important pillars of power in the turbulent West Asian region. Although the relationship of the individual GCC countries with Iran varies from country to country, as a collective, they have taken strong positions against Iran on some crucial issues. The GCC has taken a unified stance on several issues, including the Iranian nuclear programme, Iran's occupation of the Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb islands in the Gulf, which are claimed by the UAE, Iran's attempt to create sectarian tensions within GCC states by

supporting Shia groups, Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz in case of any escalation of tensions and its relationship with the US.

Among all the countries of the GCC, Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iran has been particularly competitive and adversarial over several political, economic and security issues. Persistent efforts by both nations to expand their influence across the region and their enduring pursuit of regional leadership have clashed with one another. Saudi Arabia intends to keep all the member states of the GCC on its side for support, and it also engages with other Arab countries like Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and political factions in Iraq and Yemen. Iran is engaging with the Shia-dominated countries such as Iraq and Syria and with non-state actors such as the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, as well as Shiite militia groups in Iraq. Iran's vast network of engagement is intended to further spread its influence in the region. Riyadh perceives the Iranian networks in its neighbourhood as a strategic and security challenge. Therefore, it believes that it is important for all the GCC countries to stay united to counter the Iranian challenge in their neighbourhood. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been found to have been involved in supporting the rival groups in the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Their indirect involvement in the conflicts has been described as a 'proxy war' between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region. In the present situation, both countries try to keep the balance of power in their favour. While Saudi Arabia is trying its best to keep the GCC countries united and get the support of the US and European countries, Iran is engaging with its friendly countries such as Iraq, Syria and Türkiye and using its leverage with the regional non-state actors.

The New Generation of Leaders and Their Approach towards the Organisation

With the deaths of the Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah and Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said of Oman in 2020, the GCC lost all its founding leaders. A new generation of leaders has taken over the leadership in the GCC countries. Mohammed bin Salman exercises considerable power as the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. In Qatar, Sheikh Hamad abdicated his throne in favour of his son Sheikh Tamim in 2013. In the UAE, Mohammed

bin Zayed became the President of the country after the death of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan in May 2022. In Oman, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq acceded to the throne in January 2020 succeeding the late Sultan Qaboos. There are apprehensions about whether the younger generation of leaders would continue with the vision, policies and basic tenets of cooperation followed by their predecessors or whether a new approach to the organisation will be adopted in the coming years. As the geopolitical situation has drastically changed since the formation of the organisation, the approach of the member states towards regional peace and stability has also changed accordingly. The emerging younger generation of leaders is marked by ambition but constrained by inexperience and a tendency toward impatience in handling the sensitive matters of regional security and the unity of the GCC.

The blockade of Qatar in 2017 and the subsequent response of Sheikh Tamim to overcome the crisis was a reflection of the decision of the new generation of the leadership. The implications of a boycott on the very unity and relevance of the organisation were not meticulously studied in the decision to boycott Qatar, a fellow member of the organisation. They seemed overly confident in their ability to manage the geopolitical consequences of their decision to boycott Qatar. As it happened, Qatar came closer to Iran and Turkiye – two non-Arab regional powers often detested by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for their regional policies. The fallout of the boycott has negative consequences for the cohesion of the GCC. As a matter of tribal practice in the Arab Gulf region, the elders come to mediate and try to resolve a crisis. In this case, Kuwait Amir Sheikh Al Sabah and Omani Sultan Qaboos came forward to mediate the crisis. The unity of the GCC was ultimately restored at the Al Ula summit in 2021, but the Qatar crisis has left a deep scar on the unity of the organisation.

Undoubtedly, the new generation of leaders has been aggressively pushing for economic development, the use of science and technology, regime security, national security and creating a brand for their countries. They have been initiating new economic and social projects to achieve their set target. For instance, Saudi Arabia has adopted Vision 2030, Qatar has adopted a National Vision 2030 and the UAE has floated its Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030. These are target-oriented development programmes by these countries for the

social and economic development of their countries. These vision programmes have also been used for the long-term branding of their countries. They have been using the media and social media to reach out to their own citizens as well as to the international community. The future of regional security and stability in the Gulf will, to a large extent, be shaped by the success of the new approaches adopted by the leaders.²⁷ But the new generation of leaders, having witnessed the US invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings in their neighbourhood, has not been very keen on initiating political reforms in their countries.²⁸ They would prefer to continue with the old authoritarian political system with slow political reforms, and are extremely sensitive about their regime security.

In authoritarian political systems, a change in leadership can have a huge impact on the policies of the state.²⁹ Their attitude towards their domestic socio-economic issues, the internal social contract with the citizens, regional threat perception, and relationship with neighbouring countries and external powers are some of the most crucial issues that determine the future course of development of these countries.

Arab Uprisings and the GCC

When the Arab unrest gripped the whole region beginning in 2011, it also had its impact on the GCC. In the evolving political and security situation, the countries adopted extremely cautious and self-aggrandising policies. Bahrain and Oman are the two GCC countries where significant protests were witnessed against the rulers. In such a situation, the GCC stood solidly with the rulers of these two countries, and in March 2011, the GCC announced an aid package of US\$10 billion each for Oman and Bahrain over the next 10 years. The GCC sent its 'Peninsula Shield Force' to Bahrain to help King Hamad suppress the protests. The situation in Oman and Bahrain soon stabilised, but the cracks in the GCC became visible in a short time. The Arab Spring changed the geopolitical and security situation in the region, which made the Gulf Sheikdoms cautious not only to save their regimes but also to protect their national interests in the fluid security environment. Aggressive pursuit of foreign policy objectives, uncompromisingly safeguarding their national interests, and the intense desire to play a role in regional politics have driven the countries to take such stubborn positions.

The Qatar crisis of June 2017 was the manifestation of the deep-rooted differences among the member states despite the exhibition of unity and strength of the GCC as an organisation. The contentious Saudi–Qatar relationship is one of the main reasons for the current crisis in the GCC. There have been a number of irreconcilable differences between the two countries in the recent past. Ever since Amir Sheikh Hamad of Qatar took over power in 1995 after deposing his father in a palace coup, he has aspired to make Qatar a regional power and followed an independent foreign policy. With large revenues accruing from the production and sale of natural gas, Doha soon emerged as an active player in the region. Further, Qatar has mediated in regional conflicts, most notably in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, adding to its international prestige and visibility on the world stage. With popular unrest hitting the Arab streets in 2011, Doha became further active in regional politics, particularly in Syria, Egypt and Libya.

The overthrow of the Muhammad Morsi-led government in Egypt in 2013 was a crucial moment for the unity of the GCC. Qatar was a strong supporter of the Morsi government. Qatar provided both ideological and financial support to the Morsi government, as it backed the Muslim Brotherhood. There are a number of Muslim Brotherhood leaders living in Qatar who have a strong connection with the Qatari Government. Further, Qatar has strong ties with the Palestinian Hamas, and it continues to provide funds to Hamas. Hamas maintains a political office in Doha. Qatar tried to expand its regional outreach by engaging with armed non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Saudi Arabia has had a zigzag relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in the past. But in the aftermath of the 2012 elections in Egypt, Saudi Arabia seemed to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood in its foreign policy thinking and behaviour, as it was elected to power by the people. But at the same time, Saudi Arabia continued to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is a challenge to its ideological authority in the world. The growing popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood in the post-Mubarak era Egypt made Riyadh even more uncomfortable. The UAE has also not been comfortable with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Cairo and among the people as well. In 2014, Saudi Arabia formally declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, which was immediately backed by the UAE as well.

Saudi Arabia, being the biggest power in the Gulf, has always tried to influence and shape the politics of the region. Riyadh not only has the strong support of some of its neighbours but also of the US, which has facilitated Riyadh in playing the lead role in the region. Qatar, by dint of its independent policy and massive wealth, has been trying to emerge as a decisive player in the region. Thus, the present stalemate in the GCC is a result of Riyadh's assertiveness, on the one hand, and Doha's resistance to a Saudi-dominated regional order, on the other.

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain recalled their envoys from Qatar, alleging the latter's failure to implement an agreement among GCC countries not to interfere in each other's internal affairs and to refrain from supporting terrorism and jeopardising regional security in the Gulf. They alleged that Qatar did not respect the agreement it signed, which says, 'anyone threatening the security and stability of the GCC, whether as groups or individuals – via direct security work or through political influence, and not to support hostile media'. Qatar, however, rejects such allegations and has clarified that it 'never compromised collective security of the region'. Bahrain has stood firmly with Saudi Arabia in isolating Qatar. Expressing the need to bring Qatar on the right track, Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa stated that the blockade would 'continue as long as it takes' for Doha to mend its ways. At the same time, Bahrain is concerned about the growing Iranian influence in the region and the growing warmth in the Iran–Qatar relationship in the aftermath of the announcement of the blockade. Similarly, the UAE enjoys a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia. Both these countries have shared interests in major regional, political and security issues. The UAE has been a key player in the decision to isolate Qatar.

The bitterness reached its peak in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along with Egypt, announced that they would cut off diplomatic ties with Qatar. This was triggered by an alleged statement by Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim supporting the role of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran in the region. Though Qatar has dismissed any such statements coming from its Amir, the boycotting countries have remained suspicious about the intention of Qatar in the region. This resulted in a huge crack in the GCC, and the unity and future of the organisation have come under stress. Kuwait and Oman mediated to bring the neighbours back to the negotiating table.

After years of negotiations, the GCC countries agreed to restore unity at the Al Ula summit in January 2021.

Saudi–Iran relations are marked by competition and rivalry in the region. Being the biggest power in the GCC, Saudi Arabia has always expected its smaller GCC neighbours to support it on the issue of Iran. The GCC, in its declarations, has condemned Iranian activities in the region, but individually, not all of them hold the same degree of rivalry against Iran. This has led to differences of opinion among the GCC member states. Iran has capitalised upon this situation and has cultivated ties with individual countries of the GCC. But its relationship with Saudi Arabia remains tense, and the gulf between the two continues to widen. Their deep involvement in different regional theatres, such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, inhibits any possibility of dialogue between these two regional players. In the years following the popular unrest, the Saudi–Iran divide was further widened as the unrest continued to spread and aggravate in different parts of the region.

Regional stability in the Gulf, to a large extent, depends on the unfolding dynamics of relationships among the member states of the GCC and the organisation's relationship with other key regional players such as Iran, Türkiye and Israel. The balance of power in the region has been fluctuating, with Qatar engaging with Iran and Türkiye – two non-Arab players in the region. This will have long-term repercussions for regional stability, security and balance of power. Iran is a key player in the Gulf region. Any regional security architecture in the Gulf that excludes Iran might not be sustainable in the long term.

The crisis in the GCC had a significant influence on the region. After the boycott, Qatar has come closer to Iran and Türkiye, and the relationship between Qatar–Iran and Qatar–Türkiye has taken a strong root. Russia's engagement with these three countries in future has the potential to change the regional geopolitics in the Gulf. Furthermore, if the current impasse continues for long, it will have an impact on the regional flashpoints such as Syria and Yemen, where these regional players are deeply involved. The existing regional security framework in the Gulf could be redefined if the GCC remains fragmented for long. Prolonged challenges to regional security and stability might affect their economies and energy supply as well.

The involvement of the key external players will also, to a large extent, determine the regional geopolitics and security in the Gulf. All the GCC states are allies of the US, and therefore, the role of the US in the present context becomes even more crucial for regional security and stability. The US is the most powerful external player in the Gulf region and has substantial influence over all the Gulf Sheikhdoms. Though US President Trump initially supported boycotting countries against Qatar, he subsequently corrected his position and supported mediation to end the GCC crisis. Similarly, Russia also has important stakes with the Gulf States. Russia seems to have been sympathetic to Qatar and has good relations with Iran. At the same time, it also engages with the other Gulf Sheikhdoms. The sale of weapons to the oil-rich Gulf States, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is a key objective of Russia in the region.

China has always stated that it is interested in strengthening its relationship with the Gulf countries in the domains of trade, investment, energy and scientific cooperation. China has also reiterated that it is not interfering in the regional politics or domestic affairs of the Gulf countries. China is a major importer of energy from the Gulf region. China also looks to expand its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to this region as well. There is a convergence of interests between China and the GCC countries over the Chinese BRI. But in 2023, China mediated in a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, ending decades of bitterness. This showed China's interest in being involved in the geopolitical developments in the Gulf. This also showed that China is an acceptable mediator for both the regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thus, the China–GCC engagement has been deepening in recent years.

Conclusion

The GCC has undergone a lot of changes since its formation in 1981. It was born in the middle of huge regional upheavals in West Asia and has managed successfully not only to survive the subsequent wars and regional conflicts but also has strengthened cooperation among the member states on a number of crucial issues. Economic cooperation and integration among the member states have been achieved, which has given actual benefits of cooperation to the member states. The establishment of a free trade agreement, customs union and a common market in the GCC are particularly notable developments in

the organisation. Among all the areas of cooperation in the GCC, cooperation in the field of economy has achieved the highest success.

Although not mentioned in the charter, security cooperation among the GCC countries has increased significantly as the region has continued to face wars and armed conflicts. The Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the American invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings were important regional conflicts that the GCC has navigated in its neighbourhood. Through all these wars, it has not only maintained the unity of the member states but also taken calibrated positions over these conflicts. All these wars and regional turbulences have greatly shaped the perceptions and policies of the individual member states towards the region. The common threat perception of the individual GCC countries not only made them stay united but also brought them together to strengthen their defence and security ties. In this regard, they have been successful to some extent in integrating their militaries, but they have a long way to go to achieve military integration commensurate with the potential threats to their security. Their ambition to achieve collective security in the region requires further commitment and trust among the member states.

With the change in the regional geopolitical situation and the emergence of powerful individual GCC countries, their individual threat perception has also changed. This has uncovered the differences among the member states over regional security and their perception towards the unity of the organisation. This has brought up fresh challenges for the organisation as the members do perceive security threats but are unable to forge a consensus to fight together. The Arab unrest brought new challenges for the organisation. The Qatar crisis reflected the worst phase of disunity in the organisation as Qatar was boycotted by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. The GCC has come a long way in navigating the regional turbulences for more than four decades. The fast-changing regional dynamics, the ambitions of the individual member states, the ability of the countries to balance their interests while maintaining the unity of the organisation, and fostering mutual trust among member states are some of the important factors that will shape the future course of the organisation.

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2

GCC and Gulf Security

Since its inception, the GCC as an organisation has remained central to regional security in the Gulf region. The six Arab Gulf Sheikdoms, sharing similar political and economic systems, further strengthened their security cooperation after the formation of the GCC. Mutual threat perceptions arising from the turbulences in the region and its extended neighbourhood were key drivers for the formation of the organisation. The member states believed that their national security, as well as the region's security, was challenged following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. After coming to power, Ayatollah Khomeini rapidly consolidated his control over Iranian politics and society, threatening to export his brand of Shiite Islam to the Gulf Arab countries. This posed significant political and ideological challenges to the Arab Gulf States. The siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 was another incident that heavily influenced Saudi thinking on collective security among Gulf Arabs. Believing that Iran was behind the Mecca hostage incident, Saudi Arabia sought support from neighbouring Gulf countries to establish a security framework. The Iran–Iraq War that began in 1980 further destabilised the region and caused the Gulf Arab nations to consider the implications for their economy, security, and regional stability. Uncertain about the war's outcomes and repercussions, the GCC countries came closer to each other to cooperate on political, economic, and security issues. The increasing activity and involvement of Iran in the region following the Islamic revolution concerned Saudi Arabia and its Arab Gulf neighbours deeply. In the Levant, the civil war in Lebanon raged on, with Iran heavily involved in Lebanon's internal politics by supporting

various Shia factions. Iran also established the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, which became a significant factor not only in Lebanese domestic politics but also challenged regional security and stability. This development alarmed the Gulf Arab countries, which observed Iran's influential role in Lebanese politics but felt helpless to stop Hezbollah and its activities.

Thus, the years preceding as well as following the formation of the GCC have played a key role in shaping the perception of the individual member states towards the importance of the organisation in the regional security in the Gulf. The founding leaders believed that staying united in such a turbulent period with a shared vision of regional security was the most prudent step to tackle the challenges emerging in their neighbourhood from time to time. But with time, the differences in the perception of the GCC leaders towards their national security as well as regional security have surfaced, which has deeply affected the cohesion and standing of the organisation. Though the GCC countries have been facing common security challenges emanating from their neighbourhood, the responses of the individual member countries towards the challenges vary depending on the actors and situation. But despite the differences, the GCC has emerged as a key player in regional security in the Gulf.

The GCC Charter

The charter of the GCC, agreed upon by the member states in 1981, emphasises cooperation in areas such as mutual trade, economic development, education, culture and people-to-people interactions. It focused on cooperation, coordination and integration across various issues including agriculture, water and Science and Technology.¹ Originally, security and defence cooperation among the member states was not a stated objective of the GCC, although regional insecurity and instability in their neighbourhood were key reasons for establishing the organisation. However, security challenges arising from the Iran–Iraq War prompted the member states to recognise the importance of developing defence and security cooperation. Additionally, increasing incidents of terrorism and religious radicalism prompted the GCC countries to unite in addressing emerging security threats linked to global terrorism. The spread of the Al Qaeda network in the Gulf, particularly attacks on Saudi Arabia and the sanctuary of terrorists in neighbouring Yemen, posed a

significant threat to regional security and stability. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent conflict also underscored the necessity of unity among GCC members. The controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear programme was another catalyst for cooperation. While debates over Iran's nuclear ambitions persisted among the GCC, the interest of regional and global powers in the issue grew over the years. Currently, the Iranian nuclear issue continues to be a source of discord among GCC members, with differing opinions and interests influencing their respective policies.

GCC and the Iran–Iraq War

The beginning of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980 posed significant challenges for the Gulf sheikhdoms. They found themselves caught between two large and powerful neighbouring countries at war. The GCC countries detested the new Islamic regime in Tehran and felt threatened by the messianic nationalism emerging in Iran, which aimed to export its version of Islam to the Gulf Arab countries. They were also equally concerned about the Ba'athist secular ideology promoted by Saddam Hussein, which supported Arab nationalism and the idea of a single Arab nation. Saddam also regarded the Gulf sheikhdoms as illegitimate states. As a result, the smaller and newly independent Gulf Arab nations felt threatened by a potential military invasion by Saddam. This was one reason for their limited response to the Iran–Iraq War in its early years. However, when Iran later gained a military advantage in the war, the GCC countries came out openly in support of Iraq. The financial and material aid from Gulf countries to Iraq served the mutual interests of both parties. While the active support of the GCC states helped Iraq in its war against Iran, their support also aimed to counter the growing Iranian influence in the Gulf region.

The GCC countries were not only hoping for the war to end but also were deeply concerned about the impact of the war on their economy, national and regional security. Differences among the member states of the GCC regarding the war were common and evident; however, at the organisational level, they took a unified stance in maintaining solidarity in supporting Saddam Hussein against Iran. The six GCC member states had varying degrees of engagement with Iran and Iraq in political and economic spheres, even before the Islamic revolution took place in Iran. Initially, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain expressed their support for Saddam Hussein, while others like Oman,

Qatar and the UAE were less explicit in their opposition to Iran. Furthermore, the geographical locations of these countries influenced their perceptions of the threat posed by the war between the two neighbouring powers – Iran and Iraq. Kuwait, sharing a long border with Iraq, was most concerned about the Iran–Iraq War. Saudi Arabia was primarily worried about the rise of revolutionary Shia influences in its vicinity and backed Saddam Hussein against Iran. As the war continued, all the GCC countries provided both political and financial support to Iraq. Despite differences in their approaches, the vulnerability of these countries to regional instability brought them together as a united force. They were driven by the desire for collective security amid increasing tensions in their neighbourhood.²

GCC and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

Ever since the formation of Kuwait, Iraq has had severe reservations over the boundary between the two countries. Historically, Iraq has claimed Kuwait to be a part of its territory.³ After several unsuccessful negotiations and demands from Kuwait over the boundary issue, Saddam Hussein finally launched military aggression to annex Kuwait. Besides the decades-old boundary dispute, Saddam Hussein alleged that Kuwait was stealing its oil through slant drilling in the border areas between the two countries. While the GCC countries supported Saddam Hussein during the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq War, the Iraqi attack on neighbouring Kuwait in 1990 completely changed the dynamics between the GCC and Iraq. The GCC countries came together and stood with their fellow member state, Kuwait, which was invaded by Saddam Hussein's regime. The GCC member states, which previously supported Saddam Hussein politically and economically and provided military assistance against the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, suddenly turned against Saddam once Kuwait was invaded. The GCC member states also received numerous Kuwaiti refugees displaced by the war in 1990.⁴ Suddenly, the regional political and security dynamics in the Gulf region changed. The War created further instability in the Gulf region, which was slowly recovering from the catastrophic consequences of the Iran–Iraq War. Thus, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the GCC countries remained caught in the evolving yet complex and tense security situation in their immediate neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia was one of the few Arab countries that attempted to mediate between Iraq and Kuwait

to prevent the war. Such efforts did not materialise and, eventually, could not stop Saddam Hussein from attacking Kuwait. This was yet another anxious and nervous moment for the GCC countries, who became even unsure about the future of their regime's security as well as their national interest. It was only rational for them to further strengthen cooperation among themselves over regional security.

While Kuwait faced a direct military attack from Iraq, another country deeply concerned about the Iraqi aggression towards Kuwait was Saudi Arabia. Riyadh was seriously worried about the scale of the Iraqi assault on Kuwait and the possible impact of the war on the Kingdom, given its proximity. All the other GCC member states had varying relationships with Iraq, but they also expressed concerns about the war's impact on regional security and stability. Regardless of their relations with Saddam Hussein's regime, all the GCC countries supported the UNSC resolutions.⁵ Thus, despite their differences over Iraq, they came together for the larger interest of their regime security as well as the security and stability in the region. GCC's united stance against Iraq during the Kuwait War turned the situation against Saddam. Without support from the neighbouring Gulf Arab states, Saddam became helpless after the invasion. Furthermore, international backing for Kuwait and condemnation of Saddam's aggression were crucial factors that shaped regional security in the Gulf region.

The UNSC urged Saddam Husain to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. However, Saddam's aggression persisted despite the UNSC's appeal, and on November 29, 1990, the UNSC adopted resolution 678, which authorised the use of force against the invading Iraqi military forces in Kuwait. A US-led international military coalition was formed against Iraq and was named Operation Desert Storm. The GCC countries welcomed this international military coalition against Saddam and allowed their territories to be used to launch attacks on Iraq. In a matter of a few days, Saddam's military was defeated by the coalition forces. However, this war further strengthened the military and security cooperation between the US and the GCC states. The role of the US in securing the Gulf region increased significantly because of the war.

US Invasion of Iraq and the GCC

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 further destabilised the Gulf region. The American attack on Iraq was intended to overthrow the regime of Saddam Husain. The US attack was undertaken under the pretext that Saddam Husain had huge stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which could be used against its allies in the region and to suppress the internal dissent within the country as well. Though the GCC countries wanted the war to be averted and were in favour of diplomacy, after the war started, they eventually supported the US against Iraq. As this war continued for several years to come with huge American military deployments in the GCC countries, it contributed to further dynamic change in regional security in the Gulf region. The security of the Gulf region remained volatile, and the relationship between the US and the GCC countries became even more interdependent. The presence of the American troops in the region and the American assurance of providing security to its Gulf allies in the face of the ever-evolving security challenges in the region. The GCC countries remained together as they faced common security challenges, and the US was the common security provider for them.

An unforeseen consequence of the US War on Iraq was the increase in terrorist activities in the region. After the execution of Saddam Husain in 2006, Al Qaeda and several other terrorist groups and militant organisations emerged in Iraq. The threat of terrorism to the GCC countries grew significantly. Among the GCC countries, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia experienced the most severe terrorist attacks from Al Qaeda.

The Peninsula Shield Force (PSF)

The PSF was established in 1984, right in the middle of the Iran–Iraq War. The insecurity in the minds of the GCC countries, stemming from the war, made them realise the need for a common military unit. Defence cooperation among GCC members was not outlined in the organisation's charter. However, the rapidly changing geopolitical situation and the ongoing decline in regional stability in the Gulf region prompted them to create a military wing to deter any security threats.

Collective security brought all these countries together, and they believed that any attack on one of them would be seen as an attack on all the GCC

member states. The GCC leadership later thought that preserving a collective security system in the region would require, among other things, a joint defence mechanism and joint military manoeuvres.⁶ The formation of the PSF was a result of the threats perceived by the Arab Gulf monarchies in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the instability created by the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980.

For the Arab Gulf Sheikhdoms, securing the strategic waterway of the Strait of Hormuz was of vital importance. They were deeply concerned about the increasing Iranian military influence in the waters of the Persian Gulf as well as the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, any disruption to the oil supply in the Persian Gulf directly affects their economy, which was predominantly dependent on and centred around petroleum at that time. Therefore, for economic reasons as well, it was crucial for the Arab Gulf States to establish a collective defence mechanism.

Initially, it was planned to establish the Force with about 10,000 personnel drawn from each of the member countries. The PSF has a permanent base at Hafr Al Batin, in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, which is closer to the borders of Kuwait and Iraq. The number and capacity of the force have also continued to increase day by day. Since its formation, there have been differences of opinion among the member states of the GCC regarding the size, structure and deployment of this force. The member states have discussed a range of options for the PSF, including disbanding the force, further strengthening its combat capability, and maintaining bases.⁷ The Manama Summit of the GCC held in 2000 brought about significant changes for the PSF. The Summit indicated that any interference in the domestic affairs of one of the GCC countries by a foreign power would be regarded as interference in the internal matters of all six member countries of the GCC. Later, in 2006, the GCC countries agreed that their forces should be stationed in their respective countries and join a joint combat unit as needed. Currently, the PSF has more than 40,000 troops stationed in military bases across their respective countries.

The PSF was deployed during the Kuwait War in 1991 following the Iraqi invasion. The PSF lacked military experience and was poorly equipped to deal with a military challenge of that magnitude. It, obviously, could not

achieve much militarily and could not deter an Iraqi attack on Kuwait. Again, in 2003, the PSF was deployed in Kuwait after the US invasion of Iraq that removed Saddam Hussein. However, a notable achievement of the PSF was seen in its deployment in Bahrain in 2011 in the wake of severe protests by the people. As protests aggravated day by day, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa requested military support from the PSF. Forces from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar entered the Kingdom to support the ruler. The PSF forces deployed in Bahrain largely helped the Bahraini King, to a large extent, to quell the protests. The joint forces safeguarded key infrastructure facilities but were not directly involved in confronting the protesters. Deployment in Bahrain remains one of the most credible achievements for the PSF to date. Despite its successes, failures and limitations, the PSF has become a vital element of regional integration among the GCC states. Although debates and discussions continue among member states about the future of this force, it is likely to remain a significant unifying force within the organisation.

The Arab Spring has been a key factor that has shaped the perception of the GCC member states towards their regional security. As the protests continued to spread, the leaders in the Arab world became anxious about their own regime security. They expected immediate and deeper involvement of the US to stabilise the situation and adopt a more proactive approach. But the US was measured in its response to the region-wide protests. The calculated US response was seen as retreating from the region to safeguard its national interest rather than supporting the regimes.⁸ Therefore, with the rulers facing the anger of the protesters on the streets and their regimes facing existential threats, the need for a strong and expanded force was felt the most by the GCC member states. Further, it was also believed that a stronger PSF would help deter Iranian interference in the region.⁹

GCC Unified Military Command

Integration of the militaries of the member states has been a key objective of the GCC for a long time. As frequent security challenges have continued to emanate in the region, the GCC has sought to integrate their militaries to tackle the external threats. In 2014, the GCC established the Unified Military Command to give a boost to its joint military capability. The objective was to strengthen the collective defence and integrate the militaries of all its member

states.¹⁰ The Unified Military Command does not have a standing military force; rather, all the member states maintain a specific number of forces within their countries, prepared for deployment in a foreign country should the need arise.¹¹ It is expected to play a central role in the regional security and stability in the Gulf and ward off any external aggression against member states.

The security challenges emanating from the Arab unrest provided a stimulus to the GCC to establish a unified command. The rise of terrorism and extremism following the aftermath of the beginning of the Arab Spring, along with ongoing uncertainties in regional security in West Asia and the Arab world, further contributed to the GCC's decision to create a Unified Military Command. Moreover, a strong perception has developed among the GCC countries that the US is gradually withdrawing from its commitment to providing security to the Gulf region, and the US has not stood up to their expectations in addressing the security issues that emerged during the Arab unrest. Integrating and strengthening their militaries was considered the best possible option available to them.

The headquarters of the Unified Military Command is located in Riyadh. There are high hopes that the Unified Military Command will deliver positively to regional security in the Gulf. However, it faces several challenges as well. The differing threat perception, threat assessment, and differing views on regional security and the global environment of each of the member states are some of the challenges the GCC faces in integrating its militaries. More than the tactical and operational aspects, building consensus among all six member states on critical foreign policy and regional security issues will be important for the success of the unified command. Although the GCC suffers from a number of internal differences, it unites when it comes to its national or regional security.¹² But in recent times, especially since the beginning of the Arab unrest, GCC has witnessed unprecedented internal challenges, thus leading to unexpected regional consequences.

Fighting piracy remains a significant challenge for energy-exporting GCC countries. Ensuring the safety of their sea lines of communication is crucial, as their economies heavily depend on the export of energy. While they are concerned about the security of their tankers' passage through the Strait of Hormuz because of the hostility with Iran, on the high seas, pirates pose equally

big challenges for them. Pirates in the Western Indian Ocean operate in areas such as the Strait of Bab El Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and along the Somali coast. As piracy impacts both the economy and security of the GCC countries, they have committed to safeguarding their sea lines of communication, fighting piracy to ensure smooth transportation of goods, and collaborating with the international community.

The 34-nation Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) has been patrolling the piracy-infested areas in the high seas in the Western Indian Ocean. It focuses on suppressing piracy, countering narcotics and smuggling on the high seas. There are four Combined Task Forces (CTFs) within the CMF: (i) CTF 150 (Maritime Security Operations outside the Arabian Gulf), (ii) CTF 151 (Counter-Piracy), (iii) CTF 152 (Maritime Security Operations inside the Arabian Gulf) and (iv) CTF 153 (Red Sea Maritime Security).¹³ The GCC countries have participated in the CMF and the CTF coalitions in a limited way,¹⁴ as compared to the high stakes they have in maintaining the safety of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the region. The GCC countries have also provided funding for fighting piracy. Besides, the GCC Unified Maritime Operations Centre, located in Manama, plays an important role in securing the freedom of navigation and protecting the territorial waters.¹⁵

In 2014, the GCC decided to establish a joint naval force to patrol the waters of the Persian Gulf, intended to combat terror and protect maritime commercial routes for their vessels. It was named 'Maritime Security Group 81' and was proposed to be the equivalent of the PSF.¹⁶ This initiative was primarily intended to protect their maritime interests from the Iranian threats with their growing tension with the country.

Earlier, in 2000, the GCC countries agreed to establish a Joint Defence Agreement to move towards establishing a joint defence to tackle all types of threats facing them. Significantly, Article 2 of the Joint Defence Agreement stated that 'Member States consider that any attack on any of them is an attack on all of them and any threat to one of them is a threat to all of them'.¹⁷ This was an unprecedented development towards the idea of collective security and establishing a joint defence system for the GCC. But on the ground, a credible joint defence by the GCC has not been achieved according to the expectations that were laid out in the agreement.

The GCC countries have been trying to build a consensus among themselves for establishing an integrated missile defence system in the Gulf. However, as previously mentioned, the threat perception varies considerably among the GCC countries, and this has been a key hindrance in the way. The primary missile threat to the GCC countries originates from Iran. In recent years, the Houthis in Yemen have emerged as the most serious threat to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has experienced multiple missile attacks by the Houthis. Despite a large number of missile attacks being intercepted by the Saudi defence forces, some missiles have successfully reached their targets. In September 2019, vital oil installations in Khurais and Abqaiq were attacked, disrupting oil supplies. Subsequently, the US dispatched a Patriot missile defence battery, radars and 200 troops to Saudi Arabia to bolster its defence. The GCC countries rely on US-supplied missile defence systems, and this is expected to continue in the near future. Each GCC country operates its own missile defence system, and efforts to establish a regionally integrated missile defence architecture have yet to come to fruition. The GCC countries, for their part, have discussed establishing a regional missile system. GCC officials have pointed out that ‘interoperability restrictions between GCC countries, NATO countries and the US prevent data-sharing and limit training’, which have been some of the factors hindering missile integration in the GCC.¹⁸

Iran continues to increase its missile strike capability in the region. But despite substantial threats of missile attack from Iran, the GCC’s missile defence system is still not integrated. Lack of political will among the member states for the integration of missile defence systems and ineffective organisational structures in the GCC are key reasons for this.¹⁹ But despite that, the GCC is exploring the possibility of establishing a partnership in missile defence systems in the Gulf in collaboration with the US. A Joint GCC–US action group specialising in missile defence and maritime security held a meeting in March 2022 and underscored the significance of augmenting the capabilities of the GCC states to tackle the challenges.²⁰ Both the GCC and the US agree that Iran has been using ballistic and cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles as well, and it is arming the non-state actors like the Houthis to attack the GCC states. They also agreed that Iran should be prevented from using missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which pose a threat to the regional security and stability in the Gulf region.

GCC, Iran and the Regional Security in the Gulf

Since the GCC was established in the aftermath of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, curbing Iranian influence in the Gulf region was a key objective of the organisation. Ayatollah Khomeini's open declaration of exporting the revolution to the GCC countries and Iran's aim to expand its influence posed a major security threat to the GCC states. They saw Iran as a regional hegemon with expansionist ambitions and believed they needed to stay united to face the Iranian challenge. As a result, they supported Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War. Even after more than forty years, the GCC still believes that Iran harbours ambitions to extend its influence across the region.

Iran's support for armed non-state actors in the region, such as the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, is another matter of concern for the GCC. Iran has been accused of providing political and ideological backing, along with funding and military training to these groups. Iran utilises these groups to pursue its own national interests in the region. Support for the Houthis in Yemen targets the Saudi-led military intervention and the internationally recognised government. Iranian backing has strengthened the Houthis' capabilities to resist coalition military strikes and maintain control over territories they have captured. Many countries, including the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, allege that Iran supplies military equipment and training to the Houthis. The Saudi-led coalition also claims that Lebanese Hezbollah is involved in training the Houthis in Yemen.²¹

Hezbollah is an important proxy of Iran, directly involved in military challenges to Israel. It has already engaged in war with Israel and continues to challenge Israel from Lebanon. Over the past few decades, Hezbollah has also emerged as an important player in Lebanese politics. Hezbollah's dominant presence in Lebanon, backed by Iran, leaves little room for the Gulf Arab countries to manoeuvre any moves. In Palestine, Iran has been supporting Hamas, which has a strong presence in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has defied the Palestinian Government and has fought against Israel. Israel accuses Iran of providing funding and military support to Hamas. Among the GCC countries, Qatar has been supporting Hamas financially, which has been an issue of discord in the organisation. Qatar's support for Hamas was one of the issues that led to the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along

with Egypt, in 2017. Saudi Arabia has tried to mediate between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, but without success, and therefore, its attitude towards Hamas has hardened. Furthermore, Hamas's growing proximity to Iran has further strained its relations with Saudi Arabia. In 2019, Saudi Arabia launched a crackdown and arrested a number of people suspected of supporting Hamas and collecting funds for the organisation.²²

By supporting non-state actors in the region, Iran has been asserting its influence and increasing its bargaining power. The GCC has struggled to counter Iran's support for proxy actors in Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine. However, the deteriorating situation in Yemen remains a serious concern for the GCC, as it directly impacts their security. The complex nature of the Yemeni conflict requires deeper engagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are crucial players in the Yemeni crisis. Similarly, developments in Palestine and Lebanon are of critical geopolitical importance for the GCC, yet Iran holds an advantage in both countries through its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, which it leverages strategically. The GCC currently has limited political, strategic or military options available to effectively curb Iranian influence in Lebanon and Palestine.

The GCC countries have been extremely sensitive towards the sectarian political mobilisation by Iran in the aftermath of the revolution. The GCC countries have a sizeable Shia population. Except for Bahrain, where Shias are the majority, they are a minority in all the other GCC countries. Iran has often been alleged to have been instigating the Shias in the GCC countries to revolt against their rulers. There have been a number of such instances of protests and demonstrations by the Shias in the GCC countries demanding political and religious freedom. In Saudi Arabia, there have been several instances of grievances from the Shia community demanding equal political rights and religious freedom. The Shia population in Saudi Arabia has often been alleged to have links with Iran, with the Kingdom accusing Iran of inciting its Shia population to protest against the authorities. Often, such protests have been met with heavy crackdowns by the security forces. Iran has been trying to tap into these sectarian sentiments of the Shias in the GCC countries. Bahrain has accused Iran of interfering in its internal affairs and trying to destabilise the country. Bahrain has busted many extremist and radical groups

with alleged links to Iran.²³ Iran has categorically rejected such allegations. The GCC is united in preventing any possible Iranian intervention in their internal affairs, particularly regarding the sectarian connection of their citizens.

Gulf Security Architecture: Contrasting Perceptions

Since its establishment, the GCC has been a pivotal actor in the Gulf security architecture. It has played a significant role in maintaining stability and security in the Gulf region, working closely with the US to identify threats and challenges to Gulf security, while also taking the responsibility for maintaining stability in its neighbourhood. Although recent years have seen divergences in the perceptions of Gulf security among GCC member states, there remains a consensus regarding the nature and structure of the Gulf security framework. The US has been an essential component of Gulf security since the British withdrawal from the region. The long-standing relationship between the US and GCC countries has made the US an integral part of the Gulf security infrastructure. Since the Iraq–Kuwait War, US troops have been continuously deployed throughout all GCC countries. The US Navy’s Fifth Fleet is stationed in Bahrain, and Qatar hosts the American air force at the Al Udeid airbase near Doha. The GCC countries have felt secure under the American security umbrella and believe that regional security would collapse without it. Therefore, the GCC countries currently cannot envisage a regional security architecture in the Gulf region without the US presence and involvement.

The current security architecture in the Gulf region does not align with Iranian interests, as Iran believes that the American military presence in the region and the US–GCC alliance on regional security are heavily biased in favour of the GCC countries. Iran views the American military deployment in its neighbourhood as a threat to its national security. Besides the GCC countries, the American military is deployed in the Iranian neighbourhoods of Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan (until its withdrawal in August 2020), which raises Iranian security concerns given the troubled state of US–Iran relations. Iran, therefore, proposes a new Gulf security architecture that includes all regional countries without any involvement of external powers.

In 2019, Iran proposed a collective security framework for the Gulf region, including the regional countries, called the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE).

Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly, President Hasan Rouhani stated that the aim of HOPE is ‘to promote peace, stability, progress and welfare for all residents of the Strait of Hormuz region, and to improve mutual understanding and friendly relations among them’. He also said that HOPE would be based on principles established by the UN, such as mutual respect, territorial integrity, sovereignty, non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs. Iran has discussed with Oman and Iraq about joining the HOPE. Iran’s main position is that regional issues should be solved by the countries of the region, not by outside powers. By emphasising regional solutions, Iran clearly expressed its desire to keep the US out of the Gulf. For Iran, the US presence in the Gulf is the key source of regional instability. Iran’s idea of collective security with neighbouring countries without external interference is not accepted by the GCC, which fears that without US involvement, Iran would become too dominant and hegemonic, challenging Arab interests.

Freedom and safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz remain a crucial issue for the GCC states. Their national economies are closely tied to the security of maritime navigation in this vital strait, as it is the only passage for their energy supplies connecting them to the outside world. There are strong concerns within the GCC that Iran’s dominance in the narrow strait poses a potential threat to navigation through the area. Additionally, in the past, Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of any confrontation in the region.²⁴ This remains a constant concern for the Gulf Arab countries as it affects their energy supply, thereby affecting their economy. During the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, oil tankers in the Persian Gulf were targeted by the warring countries, infamously dubbed as the ‘tanker war.’ In 2021–2022, ships and tankers were also attacked near the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. This further heightened tension in the region and again brought to the fore the sensitive issue of Iranian dominance in the Strait of Hormuz and the challenges associated with it for the GCC.

Thus, there is no consensus between Iran and the GCC over the security architecture in the Gulf region. The lack of trust and regional ambition of the regional players are key factors in the ongoing conflict over Gulf security. Contradictory and opposite positions taken by both Iran and the GCC and their starkly contrasting perceptions of regional security in the Gulf have been

the inhibiting factors in establishing a collective security mechanism in the Gulf region.

GCC's Vision for Regional Security

On March 28, 2024, the GCC unveiled its first-ever 'Vision for Regional Security' during a ceremony at its headquarters in Riyadh. In his address, GCC Secretary General Jasem Mohamed Al Budaiwi emphasised that the Vision for Regional Security document represents not merely a political undertaking but also an ethical commitment that seeks to unify the member states. He further asserted that 'our common security is the foundation upon which we build our hopes and dreams for a better future.'²⁵ This vision document reiterates the centrality of the GCC to any regional security framework and of collective defence in the Gulf region.²⁶ While such declarations of unity have been echoed by GCC leaders on numerous occasions in the past, the realisation of collective security has been consistently challenged by divergent national interests, the dynamic nature of regional threats, and the complex geopolitical landscape of the Gulf region.

The document elaborates the principles, objectives and commitments of all the member states towards regional security in the Gulf. The Vision for Regional Security is founded on the core principles of respecting state sovereignty and adhering to the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Guided by these principles, the GCC seeks to safeguard regional security and stability, address shared challenges, and resolve disputes through peaceful and diplomatic means. Furthermore, the vision underscores the importance of cultivating regional and international partnerships as a strategic approach to confronting common security threats.²⁷ Issues such as maritime security, cyber security and calls for a nuclear non-proliferation regime in West Asia are prominently placed in the document. Besides, the non-traditional security issues such as climate change, water and food security, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), energy security, defending economic resources and creating investment opportunities have also been prioritised and included in the document.²⁸ This shows the widening ambit of the concept of regional security of the GCC.

The document was released amid the Israel– Hamas War, when the entire

West Asian region is in turmoil. The conflict saw Iran's direct involvement in a military clash against Israel. The Yemeni Houthis declared their support for Hamas and have been targeting Israel. Houthis also closed the strategically important Red Sea for navigation, affecting the economies of several countries. To ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the US and the UK launched 'Operation Prosperity Guardian'. They also targeted various Houthi positions. Israel has attacked several Houthi military sites and vital installations in Yemen. Therefore, the release of the document in such a regional context highlights the concerns of GCC member states about security in the Gulf during this regional turmoil in West Asia.

Countering Terrorism

Terrorism has been a major security issue for the GCC countries for decades. They faced several terrorist attacks from Al Qaeda in the 1990s. Yemen, because of its internal weaknesses, has remained a safe haven for Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula has captured a large swath of territories in Yemen and is responsible for launching attacks on the neighbouring GCC countries. Besides, there have been growing incidents of extremism and religious radicalism in these countries as well. In post-Saddam Iraq, many terrorist and extremist groups found a suitable environment to grow and further spread their terror network and activities. Since the 9/11 attacks on the US, which brought condemnations to the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE for supporting the terrorists, these countries have adopted strong measures to check the network and financing of the terrorists. As a result, they were able to achieve a lot of success in countering terrorist activities in their countries.

The widespread instability across the region following the Arab unrest served as a significant catalyst for the growth of terrorist organisations and the escalation of their terror activities. The rise of the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, along with the establishment of the Islamic caliphate that claimed territories in both countries, marked the most alarming development not only for the region but also for the world. The caliphate attracted fighters from the Gulf and carried out attacks within these countries as well. It targeted security forces, Shia places of worship and foreign nationals working in the region. The GCC countries condemned ISIS and united in their efforts to combat it.

As ISIS expanded its activities, there was a consensus among the GCC countries to collaborate in combating the threat. A primary goal of the GCC countries was to check the flow of funds to ISIS. Although ISIS resorted to looting, ransom-taking, selling artefacts, and trading oil on the black market, it also received donations from wealthy individual donors and charitable organisations across the Gulf countries.²⁹ This became a sensitive issue for the Gulf monarchies as they have been accused in the past of supporting and funding terror activities. Therefore, as the ISIS activities intensified and so also did the global condemnation of its activities, the GCC countries joined hands together and collaborated with their partner countries to choke the flow of funds to ISIS.

The individual GCC countries adopted stricter domestic legislation to counter terror and stop funds from reaching the hands of ISIS.³⁰ As a collective, they joined hands with other countries fighting ISIS, primarily the US and the European countries. The US has been the most important country when it comes to cooperation in fighting against terror. In 2017, the US and the GCC signed an MoU to establish a Terrorist Financing Targeting Centre (TFTC). The TFTC is jointly chaired by the US and Saudi Arabia, and it intends to 'facilitate coordination, information sharing, and capacity-building to target terrorist financing networks and related activity of mutual concern' to the participating countries.³¹ The US officials claimed that they intend to confront 'new and evolving terrorist networks including ISIS, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Taliban, and the Haqqani Network.'³² Till June 2022, TFTC classified 82 individuals and terrorist organisations, including ISIS and its affiliates, Al Qaeda, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Boko Haram and the Lebanese Hezbollah.³³ The GCC countries also played an important role in the global coalition by joining militarily, particularly contributing to the air campaign against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.

GCC and the Middle East Strategic Alliance

Due to the ongoing security threat in the region and the persistent volatility in their surroundings, the GCC has continually sought to strengthen its military integration and capability. It has also worked with both regional and external allies to develop a permanent military coalition. A NATO-style military coalition has been considered many times by the GCC, but it has never been

realised. In 2017, President Trump announced the creation of a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) – a military and security coalition including all GCC countries along with Jordan and Egypt, known as GCC +2, unofficially dubbed as Arab NATO. The main aim of the alliance was to promote regional security, stability, and prosperity. Key security issues in the region, such as the spread of ISIS and other terrorist groups, the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, as well as the growing challenge posed by Iran, were central concerns for the alliance. Establishing such an entity will help the US to further its long-term strategic interest in the region, and at the same time, it will provide much-needed security to the GCC countries in the face of continuing regional turmoil. Clearly, the establishment of such a military entity is intended to stand as a military front against Iran in the region. Still, the differing threat perceptions of the individual GCC countries and a lack of political consensus over such an initiative are the major factors hindering the establishment of a European-style military pact. Besides, although the US has been at the forefront of the initiative and wants the GCC to anchor the alliance, there could be apprehensions in the minds of the Arab countries regarding the nature of commitments and their sustainability by the US towards MESA.³⁴ As the US has been seen by some of these Arab countries as withdrawing from its commitment towards regional security, questions about the US commitment towards the alliance seem valid.

Despite the uncertainties, the members of the alliance have been meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly to discuss their mechanisms, regional security, counter-terrorism strategy and economic and energy issues in the region.³⁵ But no concrete outcome over the establishment of a military and security alliance has taken place on the ground. Commitment to the issues and consensus among the member states over the nature of threats is necessary to sustain the alliance. Besides, the US will also face challenges in bringing all the GCC countries together as the organisation suffers from severe internal differences among its member states over several issues. Thus, the unity of the GCC member states as well as their relationship with Egypt and Jordan remain crucial factors for the success of MESA.

GCC and the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition

In 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) to combat terrorism. Islamic countries from West Asia, Africa and Asia joined the coalition. Notably, the coalition does not include the predominantly Shia countries Iran, Iraq and Syria, which has led to questions about whether the IMCTC is mainly a Sunni-led alliance and if there could be covert intentions lying behind its formation beyond just fighting terrorism. The coalition was established amid the rise of terrorist activities by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Saudi Arabia used its political and economic influence within the Islamic world to rally countries across continents to join. As ISIS's terrorist attacks increased and its presence expanded beyond Iraq and Syria into the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia – having experienced terrorist attacks by ISIS – decided to form the IMCTC by uniting all Muslim countries, including GCC member states, to combat ISIS.

Saudi Arabia's enthusiasm in forming the IMCTC and the exclusion of Iran from the coalition raise questions about its geopolitical implications. Though at present, 43 Muslim countries are members of the IMCTC to fight ISIS and terrorism, the priority of focusing on regional security in the Gulf seems to be paramount for Saudi Arabia. As of now, no appreciable response against terrorism has been initiated by the IMCTC. In February 2016, the IMCTC conducted its first military exercise, 'North Thunder' at the King Khaled Military City in Hafr Al Batin in Saudi Arabia. With around 150,000 soldiers, 2,540 warplanes, 20,000 tanks and 460 helicopters from 20 countries, the North Thunder was a huge exercise of its nature in the region.³⁶ The objective of the exercise was to 'achieve the highest level of preparedness, exchange expertise and promote coordination among the participating countries.'³⁷ The PSF of the GCC also participated in the exercise. The coalition meets regularly and discusses ways to fight terrorism in four important domains, such as ideology, communications, military and counter-terrorism financing.³⁸ Beyond the military exercise and the meetings, the IMCTC has not been able to achieve anything appreciable till now in its fight against terrorism. Besides, the differences within the GCC may also have an impact on the functioning of the coalition.³⁹ The IMCTC could achieve greater success if the GCC states, which are militarily and economically powerful in the coalition and have bigger stakes than others, are united over the purpose and strategy to fight against terrorism.

Conclusion

Since its establishment, the GCC has played a crucial role in regional security in the Gulf. Established in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the GCC countries sought to maintain unity and protect themselves from potential threats originating from revolutionary Iran. The eight-year Iran–Iraq War further influenced the GCC’s perception of regional security challenges and the need to safeguard their national interests. They supported Iraq against Iran, which aimed to export its brand of Islam to the Gulf Arab countries. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 dramatically changed the landscape in the Gulf. Subsequently, the American military intervention in Iraq against Saddam Hussein’s regime and the GCC’s support for Kuwait reinforced their unity, as they stood together against the Iraqi invasion. The deployment of American troops in the GCC countries during the conflict fundamentally altered security dynamics in the Gulf. Their reliance on American security has continued to this day, with the US remaining the key provider of security for all the GCC countries. As a result, the US remains the most powerful and influential presence in regional security in the Gulf. This has remained a core point of contention between Iran and the GCC countries regarding the regional security architecture. Since the Iranian nuclear controversy, the US relationship with Iran has deteriorated significantly. For Iran, the US presence in its neighbourhood poses a threat to its national security. Consequently, Iran seeks to remove the US from the Gulf region and advocates for establishing a regional security framework involving all regional countries without any outside involvement of external powers. The GCC countries, on the other hand, want the continuation of the US security umbrella, believing that without the US military presence, Iran could become excessively dominant and hegemonic.

The internal differences between the GCC countries are another issue that has affected not only the unity of the organisation but also its relevance as a credible regional player in the Gulf and the wider West Asian region. Their differing perceptions of regional security and the threats emanating from Iran are key challenges to their organisational unity. The Qatar crisis of 2017 is a reflection of the deep-seated differences within the organisation and the member states’ divergent views on regional security.

The beginning of the Arab unrest also posed new challenges for the GCC. Despite these difficulties and the existing differences, the GCC countries have come together, when necessary, on key security issues affecting their region. The rise of ISIS threatened the security of all GCC nations, prompting them to take significant steps and unite in combating this menace. Likewise, they have collaborated to tackle piracy and ensure the safety and security of maritime routes. Despite ongoing challenges, the GCC is working to integrate their militaries and cooperate with friendly nations to enhance its protection from external threats. There are many future challenges and opportunities for further military integration, but some important steps have already been taken, demonstrating the GCC's vital role in maintaining Gulf security. The proposal to establish the MESA represents another move to strengthen Gulf security in partnership with the US. Similarly, the IMCTC aims to bring Muslim countries across the continents together in the fight against terrorism. Although differences persist among member states, the GCC continues to play a crucial role in Gulf security. Over the last four decades, the organisation's role and the perception of its members towards their regional environment have continually evolved. Amid regional turbulence, the GCC states are navigating numerous challenges, cooperating on key issues, and safeguarding their national interests.

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3

The Qatar Crisis

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt announced a diplomatic boycott of Qatar. Among other measures, the boycott included imposition of land, sea and air embargoes on Qatar. Known as the 'quartet', these four boycotting countries accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and destabilising the Gulf region. They also alleged Qatar of violating a 2014 GCC agreement, which required all the member states to resist supporting terrorism. Kuwait and Oman did not sever ties with Qatar and acted as mediators in the crisis, working to find a way to restore the unity and cohesion of the organisation. The crisis had a far-reaching impact on the unity and relevance of the GCC as a regional organisation. Although the GCC has experienced many difficulties in the past, the Qatar crisis was arguably the lowest point in the history of the GCC, which challenged the very foundation of the unity among the Gulf sheikhdoms.

The Allegations

The boycotting quartet levelled several serious allegations against Qatar. The most offensive and serious allegation against Qatar was that it supported terrorism and extremism in the region. They criticised Qatar's backing for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Hamas. Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood remains a significant challenge for all these countries. Similarly, they also accused Qatar of supporting Hamas and undermining the legitimacy and influence of the Palestinian Authority. The then Saudi Foreign

Minister, Adel Al Jubeir, stated that Qatar must halt such policies of supporting terrorism and extremist elements in order to contribute to stability in the region.¹ Furthermore, Qatar's growing relationship with Turkiye and Iran – two big and powerful non-Arab countries in the region – was a significant irritant in Qatar's relations with the GCC countries. Turkiye has built a huge military base in Qatar. Qatar has maintained a good relationship with Iran, as both countries share the world's largest natural gas field, known as South Pars, in the Persian Gulf. The boycotting quartet alleged that Qatar was using its satellite television network, *Al Jazeera*, as a propaganda tool against them. The *Al Jazeera* network has spread quickly to all parts of the world in a short period and has emerged as a powerful media organisation. It has been alleged that *Al Jazeera* has often provided a platform to extremist leaders and incited violence.

As much as Qatar's alleged support for terrorism and extremism in the region, Bahrain was concerned with the growing Qatari–Iranian relationship. While appealing to Qatar to align its policies with the rest of the GCC countries, Bahrain wants Iran not to interfere in the regional issues in the Arab Gulf region. While emphasising that the boycott was not intended against the people of Qatar, Bahrain alleged Qatar of supporting systematic terrorist acts against the Kingdom, undermining its national security and conspiring against the government.² The leaders of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt have stated that announcing a blockade against Qatar was not an easy decision for them, but such a decisive action was necessary because all the diplomatic negotiations with Qatar had failed to convince the country to make a course correction in its regional foreign and security policies.

The 13-Point Demand

Following the announcement of the boycott, the boycotting quartet issued a 13-point demand on June 23, 2017 for Qatar to comply with. The demands included, among others, scaling down diplomatic engagements with Iran, cutting off military cooperation with the country, closing the Turkish military base in Qatar, and stopping all military engagements with Turkiye. They also demanded that Qatar end its support for terrorists and terrorist organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and the ISIS, and freeze their assets. They also demanded that Qatar close down the *Al Jazeera*

satellite television network, as they believed that it was used by Qatar as a propaganda tool. The boycotting countries also asked Qatar to align its foreign and security policies with those of the other GCC countries.³ They issued an ultimatum that the 13-point demands must be met within ten days. In response, Qatar rejected the allegations, refused to comply with the demands made by the boycotting quartet, and described them as a violation of international law and Qatar's sovereignty.⁴

Later, on July 5, 2017, the boycotting quartet issued six broad principles to be complied with by Qatar, thereby replacing the original 13-point demands. The six principles included Qatari commitment to fight terrorism in all forms and to stop funding and providing a safe haven to the terror groups; commitment to the Riyadh Agreement of 2013 and executive mechanism of 2014; prohibiting all forms of expression that incite hate – an indirect reference to the *Al Jazeera* television network; not to interfere in the internal affairs of other states; commit itself to the Arab–Islamic–US Summit held in Riyadh in May 2017; and assume responsibility, like other members of the international community to all forms of terrorism and extremism as they are a threat to international peace and security.⁵ By replacing the 13-point demand with the six broad principles to be complied with by Qatar, the boycotting quartet tried to display flexibility in their approach to resolving the crisis. They also believed that Qatar would be forthcoming in adhering to the six principles rather than the stringent 13-point demands. But Qatar, on its part, refuted all the demands and continued to stick to its strategy of survival in the face of the boycott.

While Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE took stringent actions against Qatar, the two remaining members of the GCC – Oman and Kuwait – maintained a neutral stance towards Qatar. In the months following the announcement of the boycott by the quartet, both of these countries sought to mediate between the conflicting parties and resolve the crisis. The Kuwaiti Amir, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah, made several trips to the Gulf capitals to find a mutually acceptable solution for both sides. Similarly, Oman, which has extensive experience in mediating regional conflicts, also became involved in seeking a way out of the crisis.

The boycott left the GCC a fractured organisation with three members

isolating another member, and two other members mediating to diffuse the crisis. This was a uniquely uncomfortable and embarrassing situation for the organisation, where the fellow members openly moved against a neighbour, imposing crippling sanctions. This not only uncovered a number of underlying unresolved issues between the members of the organisation but also exposed their differing perceptions of regional security and stability. The leaders from the boycotting quartet made statements which were humiliating for Qatar, expecting the country to comply with their 13-point demands. Qatar, on the other hand, refused to comply with the 13-point demands and called it a violation of its sovereignty. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani stated that the GCC as an alliance has been undermined by the Qatar crisis and suggested that reforms or a fundamental reshaping of the organisation is essential to deal with the emerging challenges in the region.⁶ Such statements by Qatar indicated the country's stubbornness in the face of the boycott imposed by the quartet and that it is capable and willing to take extreme steps, including moving away from the GCC, which would significantly damage the reputation and the relevance of the organisation.

Egypt – a non-GCC country – joined Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain from the beginning in the boycott of Qatar. Egypt under former President Hosni Mubarak enjoyed a cordial relationship with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. Their relationship was affected after Mubarak was removed, and later, the Mohammed Morsi-led Muslim Brotherhood government assumed power in Cairo. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE were not comfortable with the Muslim Brotherhood government in power in Cairo, they still managed to engage with it. Meanwhile, Qatar, by dint of its close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, substantially strengthened its relationship with the Morsi government in Egypt. Qatar's close relationship with Morsi made Riyadh feel sidelined and redundant. Morsi could not complete his tenure as the president as he was overthrown in a coup that later brought Abdel Fattah El Sisi to power. Sisi's coming to power in Egypt changed the whole power dynamics in the region. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE got back to their old relationship with Egypt, Qatar's relationship with Egypt suffered a huge blow, and all the initiatives Qatar had taken with the Morsi regime now became redundant. After Sisi came to power, he launched a heavy crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood leaders. Several Muslim Brotherhood leaders were arrested and

jailed, while many of them fled to other countries, including Turkiye and Qatar. As the Muslim Brotherhood continues to pose political challenges for the Sisi government, the latter despises the countries that provide any kind of support – political, economic or ideological – to the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, the Egypt–Qatar relationship suffered a heavy blow, as the Sisi government is highly sceptical of the Qatari Government's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. For this reason, Egypt supported Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain against Qatar, which it believes supports the Muslim Brotherhood. Besides, Egypt always wants to have a good relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as it has been beneficial for Egypt in terms of regional power dynamics and receiving economic aid from these countries.

In order to further pressure Qatar, the boycotting quartet appealed to their friends and allies to cut off diplomatic ties with Qatar. A number of African countries, such as Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti, Comoros, Chad, Niger and Gabon – all of them are allies of Saudi Arabia – joined the boycott call. Jordan was the only other country from the West Asian region to cut off ties with Qatar in support of the Quartet. Besides, the Maldives, owing to its close relationship with Saudi Arabia, was the only country in South Asia to support the boycott call.

The boycott was both politically humiliating and economically crippling for Qatar. The boycotting countries recalled their ambassadors from Qatar, closed their diplomatic missions and asked the Qatari diplomats to leave the country. They asked the Qatari citizens living in their countries to leave and also asked their citizens in Qatar to return. This not only affected the bilateral relations between the countries but also negatively affected the people-to-people contact between these countries. Qatar, which was in the Saudi-led military coalition fighting against the Houthis in Yemen, withdrew from the alliance.

Qatar's only land border with Saudi Arabia was closed by the latter. Restrictions were also imposed on Qatari ships and flights by the boycotting countries. Bilateral trade and commerce with Qatar were also affected, thus affecting its economy. Restrictions were imposed on banking and financial transactions as well. As the neighbours closed borders and stopped trade and business, concerns arose in Qatar regarding the supply of necessities such as

food, water and medicines. Qatar's stock markets plummeted sharply after the announcement of the boycott.⁷

Qatar's Response to the Boycott

Qatar stated that the allegations against it are 'unjustified and based on false claims and assumptions'.⁸ Reiterating that it is fully committed to the charter of the GCC, Qatar claimed to have undertaken its role in fighting terrorism in the region. It also stated that it does not interfere in the affairs of other countries and that the imposition of the boycott by its neighbours in coordination with Egypt is a violation of its sovereignty.⁹ While stating that Qatar is open to dialogue with the boycotting countries to resolve the crisis, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani asserted that such an initiative must come from the boycotting quartet. He further reiterated that Qatar 'never compromised the collective security of the region' and that the blockade by the neighbouring countries is extraordinary and unprovoked.¹⁰ Al Thani alleged that the boycotting countries want Qatar to surrender its sovereignty in return for ending the isolation. Reiterating this sentiment, later in October 2017, Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim stated during a television interview that 'our sovereignty is a red line; we don't accept anybody interfering in our sovereignty'.¹¹

In the international forums, Qatar also raised its arguments based on sovereignty and international law. Speaking at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2017, Sheikh Tamim stated that the blockading countries intervene in the internal affairs of other countries and that the blockade was a violation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreement and the human rights conventions as it brought social, religious and economic harms to a large number of people in all the GCC countries as it affected their education, freedom and right to work among others.¹²

At the 2018 Munich Security Conference, Sheikh Tamim argued for a new regional security architecture for the region. He appreciated the European Union model framework for dispute resolution and stated that such a model is required in the Middle East.¹³ He also stated that in the face of the boycott, Qatar has been able to protect its sovereignty and conduct economic activities in a normal way, and this has been successful because of diplomacy and strategic

economic planning to face the regional challenges.¹⁴ Emphasising that dialogue is the best way to resolve the crisis, Sheikh Tamim, in his speech at the general debate of the 73rd session of the UN in September 2018, stated that the crisis has harmed the reputation of the individual GCC countries and paralysed the effectiveness of the GCC as a regional organisation.¹⁵ Qatar, therefore, argued for an unconditional dialogue between all the countries to resolve the crisis.

But the anger and frustration of Qatar towards its neighbours were reflected in some of its actions. The UAE and Bahrain alleged that Qatar intercepted Emirati civilian and cargo aircrafts and harassed them. This led to the UAE filing a complaint at the UN against Qatar.¹⁶ Furthermore, Bahrain also alleged that Qatar frequently intercepts its vessels in the Persian Gulf waters.¹⁷ In September 2017, Qatar invited the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to visit Qatar to assess the impact of the boycott on human rights in the country. In response, the OHCHR dispatched a technical team to Qatar to collect information about the crisis and to provide technical support to the country. In its report, published in December 2017, the OHCHR stated that the blockade has had an impact on the human rights of the citizens of all these countries.¹⁸ Severe restrictions were imposed on the freedom of expression of the individuals as well as of the media. The freedom of the movement of people and goods was curtailed, families were separated, businesses and entrepreneurship were affected. Education was as well affected when Qatari students were expelled from the boycotting countries.¹⁹ More importantly, the report stated that as most of the measures are non-targeted, the measures hardly made any distinction between the State of Qatar and its citizens, making it a matter of serious human rights concern. Qatar supported and welcomed the OHCHR report by stating that, as the report has been prepared by a UN entity after a visit and thorough investigation by the technical team, the boycotting countries simply cannot discard the findings.²⁰ It also stated that for the first time, the UN has made such a report on the impact of the blockade on human rights.

Qatar appealed against the air embargo imposed by the boycotting quartet at the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), alleging a violation of its rights under the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation. The boycotting countries appealed to the International Court of

Justice (ICJ), arguing that the ICAO lacks the authority to hear the case. The appeal was rejected by the ICJ in July 2020, which affirmed that the ICAO is the competent authority to hear the case.²¹

Furthermore, in June 2018, Qatar went to the ICJ against the UAE, alleging that the blockade is a violation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) of 1965, as the boycott targeted the Qataris based on their nationality. The case was decided in favour of Qatar, with the ICJ urging the UAE to take measures to reunite Qatari families separated by the blockade; to ensure Qatari students can complete their education; and to allow Qatari nationals access to the judiciary and tribunals in the UAE.²²

The intra-GCC conflict also reached the WTO. In July 2017, Qatar filed a formal complaint with the WTO accusing the boycotting countries of ‘coercive attempts at economic isolation’.²³ Qatar accused Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain of violating international trade laws and conventions by imposing blockades and trade embargoes. For Qatar, the imposition of the boycott negatively affected its trade in goods, services and intellectual property rights with its neighbours. Qatar alleged that prohibition and restriction on the import and export of goods, ban on Qatari nationals to provide services and copyright held by Qatari nationals are violations under the WTO rules.²⁴ Qatar, therefore, requested a formal consultation with these three countries at the WTO, which is a first step to be achieved within 60 days to settle the disputes. On its part, Qatar clarified that it is open to dialogue and negotiations with them and the complaint at the WTO is intended to examine the legalities of their actions and to find a solution to the dispute.²⁵ The boycotting countries, on the other hand, argued that their national security has been challenged by Qatar’s actions and that they may be allowed an exemption on that ground under the WTO rules.

In December 2018, Qatar decided to withdraw from the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), of which it had been a member since 1961. Qatar rejected any links between the decision and the boycott and stated that it is purely an economic decision and that the country looks forward to strengthening its position in the natural gas sector, as it is the top gas exporter in the world.²⁶ As the decision to quit the organisation came in the aftermath

of the boycott, the political factors driving such a decision cannot be ruled out. Since Saudi Arabia is the largest producer and exporter of oil, it has a huge influence on the oil market as well as the policy decisions of OPEC. The rivalry between the two countries came out in the open in the aftermath of the boycott. Qatar felt that leaving the organisation, where it did not have much influence and Riyadh calling the shots, was a rational decision.

Qatar's Survival Strategy

Qatar was heavily reliant on Saudi Arabia and the UAE for its supply of foodstuffs. In the immediate aftermath of the boycott, Qatar faced the urgent challenge of maintaining the supply of basic essentials needed for daily life. Iran and Türkiye, two non-Arab regional players, quickly responded by offering to supply necessities such as food and medicines to assist Qatar. In that context, accepting help from Iran and Türkiye was an easy decision for Qatar, as both were eager to assist during a period of serious crisis.

After the boycott, Iran strongly condemned the boycott of Qatar by its Gulf neighbours. Iran quickly moved to help Qatar and opened its skies for Qatari aircraft, which had been closed earlier between the two countries. In the weeks immediately following the boycott, Iran supplied plane loads of food items to Qatar to meet the requirements, and the Iranian leadership assured Qatar that they would continue to supply food items.²⁷

The Iran–Qatar relationship suddenly gained momentum, and both countries exchanged visits by top leadership and signed agreements on a range of issues. For Qatar, its reliance on Iran during a period of crisis started with a desperate need to survive in the aftermath of an embargo imposed by its Arab neighbours. Within a few months, both countries found several areas of mutual cooperation, extending beyond the boycott issue. To the utter discomfort of the boycotting countries, Qatar even publicly stated that it is comfortable to war with Iran in the region. Thus, Qatar's approach to dealing with the embargo not only made Qatar engage with Iran, but at the same time, it created further challenges for its boycotting Arab neighbours.

Iran seemed to be the biggest beneficiary in the whole episode of the Qatar crisis. For Iran, a weakened and fractured GCC works to its advantage. The Qatar crisis was possibly the most opportune moment for Iran to intervene

in Arab affairs and challenge its arch-rival, Saudi Arabia. For the boycotting quartet, the Iranian approach to quickly engage with Qatar was not only provocative but also seen as a challenge to regional security in the Gulf.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rejected the allegations made by the boycotting quartet against Qatar, urged them to resolve the issue with Qatar and vowed to support the country in all possible manner. Türkiye also responded quickly and supplied food, medicines and other requirements to Qatar via sea and air routes within two weeks of the announcement of the boycott.²⁸ Türkiye described the isolation as ‘inhumane and against Islamic values’ and described it as a ‘death penalty’ for Qatar.²⁹ Furthermore, in a move that was seen as highly provocative and challenging to the boycotting countries, the Turkish Parliament fast-tracked the deployment of the Turkish military to Qatar on June 7, 2017. Though the bill was certain to have passed in the parliament as it had the backing of President Erdogan and his party, it was fast-tracked after the announcement of the blockade on Qatar.³⁰ The first batch of Turkish military, along with five armoured vehicles, landed swiftly in Qatar in the same month³¹, and another batch of soldiers joined them in December.³²

The relationship between Qatar and Türkiye has significantly improved since Erdogan came to power in 2014. Both countries signed a defence agreement that same year, which was ratified by the Turkish Parliament in 2015. Since then, their defence ties have continued to consolidate and strengthen. Turkish troops are deployed at the Qatar–Türkiye Combined Joint Force Command at the Tariq Bin Ziyad military barracks in Doha. This was the first-ever overseas military deployment of Turkey in the region with a capacity to accommodate around 5000 Turkish troops. While inaugurating the new military base in 2019, Erdogan stated that the joint military base is a symbol of ‘brotherhood, friendship, solidarity and sincerity’, and that it would help maintain peace and stability not only in Qatar but also throughout the region.³³ Furthermore, Qatar has been providing military training to Qatari defence personnel, and the militaries of both countries have conducted joint military exercises. In November 2017, Qatar, Iran and Türkiye signed a transportation agreement aimed at facilitating trade and the delivery of goods to Qatar. Under this deal, Iran agreed to serve as the transit country between Türkiye and Qatar to facilitate the movement of goods to Qatar.³⁴

Implications for the Regional Geopolitics

The boycott of Qatar changed the landscape of regional politics in the Gulf. Qatar, receiving support from Iran and Türkiye, and refusing to comply with the 13-point demands or the six broad principles they proposed, further infuriated the boycotting countries. The Qatar crisis had an unprecedented impact on the regional geopolitics. The existing balance of power shifted as Qatar was isolated and quickly engaged with Iran and Türkiye. Over time, Qatar, Iran and Türkiye formed an informal alliance, focusing on economic and security cooperation and signing several agreements among themselves.

The two major non-Arab countries in the region, directly interfering in the affairs of the GCC by supporting Qatar, were a direct challenge to the boycotting quartet. The existing divide between them continued to widen, further hardening the quartet's position vis-à-vis Qatar. They felt further betrayed by the activities of Qatar. While they had expected Qatar to apologise for its activities and re-join the GCC, its informal alliance with Iran and Turkey, which changed regional geopolitics, was an unintended consequence of the boycott.

As an organisation, the GCC was polarised, with Qatar isolated by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain, while the two other members, Kuwait and Oman, were trying to mediate and pacify the situation. Qatar stated that the GCC as an organisation is paralysed after the blockade and condemned the 'blockade mentality' of the boycotting countries.³⁵ Such a statement from Qatar reflected that it was not submissive to the conditions imposed by the boycotting quartet, and that it may consider joining other countries, forming new alliances and that it would not hesitate to break away from the GCC if pushed to the wall.

The US position on the Qatar crisis significantly influenced regional politics and the changing dynamics within the organisation. President Trump's accusation that Qatar supports terrorist organisations in the region, and, thereby, completely backing the boycotting countries, marked a departure from US policy towards the region. The US had engaged with all GCC countries without taking sides in their internal disputes, maintaining good relations with each individual member state and with the GCC as a collective. President Trump's direct accusation against Qatar not only shocked the country but also changed the regional geopolitical dynamics as well. Trump later did a

course correction on the Qatar issue and mediated between the conflicting parties to help reconcile their differences.

Implications for the Relevance of GCC

The Qatar crisis had implications not only for the unity and cohesion of the GCC but also for the relevance of the organisation, as it was a symbol of stability in the turbulent West Asian region. The manner in which the crisis unfolded, and the kind of allegations and counter-allegations that were made against each other, showed that the GCC has descended to a point of no return to normalcy. The GCC's image suffered damage in international forums. As the crisis broke out, and subsequent efforts were made to restore order, the international community watched anxiously, concerned about the possible outcomes of the internal conflict within the GCC. As the dispute persisted, the international community engaged with the member states bilaterally.

After the boycott, as a mark of protest, the Qatari Amir stopped attending the GCC annual summits, which are usually attended by the Amir. Sheikh Tamim did not attend the 39th GCC summit held in Riyadh in December 2018 and sent the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Sultan Al Muraikhi, on his behalf.³⁶ Similarly, he skipped the 40th GCC summit, and Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani represented Qatar at the meeting. The absence of the Qatari Amir from the annual summits portrayed an utterly bleak and fractured image of the organisation outside the region. Extending the boycott would have further damaged the image of the GCC as an effective regional organisation. This would have directly affected the brotherly and tribal nexus among its members, as well as the extensive economic, political, cultural and security network they have painstakingly established during the last four decades. Qatar's prolonged boycott would have negatively impacted all the individual member states. Therefore, it was crucial for the boycotting countries to end the embargo on Qatar and restore the unity and relevance of the organisation.

Reconciliation at Al Ula Summit and Beyond

All the GCC countries decided to reconcile their differences at the 41st annual summit held at Al Ula in Saudi Arabia in January 2021. The boycotting quartet

announced their intention to end Qatar's isolation, open their airspace and land borders and restore full diplomatic relations with Qatar. The reconciliation occurred without Qatar having agreed to any of its initial 13-point demands or the six broad principles, which were announced by the boycotting countries in June and July of 2017, respectively.

The GCC countries agreed to restore their unity after lengthy and strenuous efforts were made by Kuwait, Oman and the USA. Both sides softened their positions and agreed to come together for the benefit of the organisation, regional peace and stability. The Al Ula Summit was presented as a mutually beneficial outcome for all the parties concerned. Qatar did not comply with any of the 13-point demands issued by the boycotting countries, thus maintaining its sovereignty and independent foreign policy. The boycotting countries softened their approach by stating that the 13-point demand was a 'maximalist negotiating position'³⁷ taken by them, and it was not intended to hurt Qatar. Similarly, Qatar stated that all the member countries have shown seriousness to come together, and the reconciliation achieved at the Al Ula Summit is a victory for all the countries of the GCC.³⁸

The Al Ula Summit emphasised the principle of collective security and agreed to strengthen their military integration in order to collectively face the emerging security challenges in the region and further integrate their economies. Importantly, the Al Ula Summit revived the consensus among the member states to implement a proposal made by Saudi Arabia at the 36th Summit in 2015, which called for 'joint defence and security systems and a unified foreign policy for all the members'. While the Al Ula Summit restored the unity of the GCC, many complex issues and questions remain for all the member states to address in the future. There has been no significant change in Qatar's foreign policy since the reconciliation. Its engagements with Iran and Turkiye continue to strengthen, encompassing economic, military and security arenas. Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood also remains unchanged. It also continues to support the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hamas in Palestine.

The boycotting countries have also come to understand and accept the Qatari position on regional issues. Qatar's relationship with Turkiye and the presence of a Turkish military base in Doha remain critical, as Qatar is committed to its relationship with Turkiye. Similarly, Qatar's relationship with

Iran continues to grow, despite Qatar's return to the GCC fold. Qatar's relationship with Turkiye and Iran will be crucial in the coming years, especially as countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have very complex relations with these two countries. Whether these three countries accept Qatar in further solidifying its relationship with Turkiye and Iran, and whether they still believe Qatar is fully dedicated to regional security, stability and combating terrorism, would be crucial and shall determine the future course of the organisation. The situation has remained peaceful following the Al Ula Summit. However, the Qatar crisis will be remembered as one of the darkest periods in the organisation's history, when unity among member states was at its lowest. After lengthy and arduous efforts, the unity has been restored, but a number of issues still remain unresolved among the members. Reaching a consensus on these issues would help further strengthen the organisation. Any new spark could potentially damage its unity and relevance in the region and beyond.

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4

Geopolitical and Security Challenges

The GCC, as a collective, faces several internal and external issues and challenges to be addressed at the organisational level. Differences among the member states over various issues have always existed since the establishment of the organisation. Often, such differences are resolved through negotiation and consultation among themselves. The beginning of the Arab unrest in December 2010 significantly impacted the GCC, presenting new challenges that widened disagreements over several issues. While some differences have been managed, critical problems have remained unresolved for years. These involve key geopolitical and national security concerns over which a consensus has not been achieved. Additionally, the GCC faces external challenges that could cause serious harm to the organisation. Given the sensitive nature of these issues, it appears that the GCC will continue to face substantial internal and external difficulties in the years ahead.

Iran Factor

Iran has been a key factor in the establishment of the GCC in 1981. A shared concern among the Gulf states over Iran's perceived expansionist and imperial ambitions served as a unifying factor that led to the establishment of the GCC. In the years immediately following its creation, the member states adopted a firm stance against Iran's policies and actions in the Persian Gulf region. Since then, Iran has remained a central geopolitical, security and strategic concern for the GCC. The relationship between the two sides has been consistently

tense, shaped by the Shia–Sunni sectarian divide, territorial disputes, competition for regional influence, the Iranian nuclear programme and the presence of the US in the Gulf.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, posed a significant political and ideological challenge to the Gulf Arab monarchies. Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration to export his revolutionary Islamist ideology to the neighbouring Arab states created considerable anxiety among the ruling elites of the GCC, who drew their political legitimacy from Islam. Any ideological challenge that questions this legitimacy is perceived as a direct threat to their regime stability. In the aftermath of the revolution, GCC states accused Iran of instigating sectarian unrest by mobilising Shia communities within their borders to revolt against the rulers. This perceived threat contributed to a sense of unity and cohesion among the GCC member states during the early years of the formation of the organisation. Their collective response is often regarded as having successfully contained the ideological influence emanating from post-revolutionary Iran.

As the largest and most influential member of the GCC, Saudi Arabia assumed a leading role in confronting the perceived threat posed by post-revolutionary Iran. With Mecca and Medina – the two holiest sites in Islam – located within its borders, Saudi Arabia often positions itself as the custodian of Islam and a central authority in the Arab and Islamic world. For Saudi Arabia's rulers, Islam plays an essential legitimising role in the Kingdom. Islam is also an important factor in the Kingdom's foreign policy orientation. Any major religious or ideological trends emerging to challenge the traditional Sunni Wahhabi Islam are, in themselves, a challenge to its authority and standing among the Muslim countries. In addition to ideological rivalry, the rise of revolutionary Iran was also perceived as a geopolitical threat to Saudi Arabia's dominant position in the Gulf region. These concerns were further intensified by the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of extremists led by Juhayman Al Otaibi, who challenged the Saudi monarchy and called for restoring the Wahhabi Ikhwan movement.¹ This incident came as a major shock to the Saudi ruling family.

Saudi Arabia has often accused Iran of instigating its Shia population, which is concentrated mostly in the Eastern Province, to incite unrest in the

country. The Saudi Shias have often complained of political, economic and religious discrimination by the Saudi authorities. Often, they have protested against their rulers in the streets, which on several occasions have turned into violent confrontations. The Saudi authorities allege that some Shia organisations and groups based in its Eastern Province are influenced by the Iranian Islamic revolution. Riyadh views the Shia protests in the Eastern Province as an Iranian strategy to destabilise the Saudi monarchy. The Eastern Province remains a soft underbelly for the House of Saud for its restive Shia population. Besides, there is a significant economic ramification of the protests as the Eastern Province has vast energy reserves and vital installations. Iran has also been alleged to support the Shias in countries such as Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.² For these reasons, Saudi Arabia believed that revolutionary Iran is a potential ideological challenge and a national security threat. This perception drove the Saudi desire to further strengthen the unity and cooperation among the Gulf Arab monarchies. For the newly independent smaller Gulf states, the rise of post-revolutionary Iran represented a significant security challenge as they were still consolidating their domestic political authority and institutions. The Iranian Revolution was one of the first major challenges faced by them. This became a major reason for all of them coming together to form the GCC in 1981 in the face of a common threat.

As a regional organisation, the GCC has been consistently critical of Iran's perceived destabilising role in the Gulf region and trying to alter the prevailing balance of power. The GCC has expressed strong concerns over several aspects of Iranian policy, with particular emphasis on the Iranian nuclear programme. The Iranian nuclear issue has emerged as one of the most pressing geopolitical and security concerns for the GCC. While the GCC formally acknowledges Iran's right to pursue a peaceful civilian nuclear energy programme, its member states remain deeply sceptical of Tehran's intentions. They fear that Iran intends to make a nuclear weapon, and it would pose a significant threat to regional security and the Gulf monarchies in the future. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will completely change the geopolitical situation in the region. It will change the existing balance of power in Iran's favour and diminish the influence of the Arab countries in the region. Therefore, the GCC countries have frequently raised the Iranian nuclear issue at the regional and international forums.

In response to Iran's nuclear ambitions, the GCC has consistently aligned itself with Western efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The GCC has publicly endorsed the imposition of stringent sanctions and other coercive economic measures against Iran to halt its nuclear programme. Following the reports in 2004 regarding Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, GCC member states reacted with alarm and urgency. They not only raised the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme in the international forums, but also sought more and more support from the international community in condemning the Iranian desire to acquire nuclear weapons. In doing so, the GCC has positioned itself as a vocal proponent of non-proliferation in the region, emphasising the destabilising implications of a nuclear Iran for both regional and international security.

Despite initial apprehensions, the US and several European nations continued diplomatic efforts to engage Iran in nuclear negotiations. The Obama Administration was serious about reaching an agreement that would prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons in the future. These efforts culminated in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The agreement was met with cautious approval by the GCC countries, who welcomed the accord in the hope that it would contribute to regional peace and stability.³ However, there was a strong underlying apprehension among the GCC countries regarding Iran's true intentions. The JCPOA resulted in the lifting of long-standing international sanctions against Iran. It provided Tehran an increased financial and economic flexibility. The GCC states closely monitored Iran's subsequent regional activities and expressed concern over what they perceived as Tehran's continued involvement in disruptive activities across the West Asian region. They alleged Iran of misusing the financial gains obtained from the lifting of international sanctions to fund terror organisations and non-state actors in the region,⁴ such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Palestine and Shia armed groups in Iraq. They further accused Iran of being involved in exacerbating conflicts in the region, including in Yemen, Iraq and Syria by providing military support to these groups, thereby undermining regional security and stability.

In 2018, then-President Donald Trump announced the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA, as he believed that the deal

did not completely stop Iran from making a nuclear weapon. The GCC countries largely supported the American decision⁵ and called for the imposition of stricter economic sanctions on Iran. They were also worried about the fact that the Iranian nuclear deal did not completely halt Iran's uranium enrichment activities but merely imposed temporary restrictions. The GCC states feared that, in the long-term, these limitations would expire and ultimately Iran would be able to develop nuclear weapons capabilities. Following the US withdrawal, Iran was also alleged to have violated several provisions of the JCPOA, including exceeding the agreed limits on uranium enrichment and stockpiling. These developments reinforced the GCC's apprehensions regarding Iran's nuclear intentions and heightened fears of further destabilisation in the region.

After coming to power, President Joe Biden started indirect negotiations with Iran in Vienna in order to restore the JCPOA. The Vienna rounds of negotiations could not achieve any substantial progress among the negotiating countries. But as the Vienna rounds of talks continued, the GCC further hardened its position and demanded that it should be invited to participate in the regional and international negotiations over the Iranian nuclear issue as they are directly affected by Iran's destabilising behaviour in the region.⁶ But between 2015, when the JCPOA was signed, and the Vienna talks, the GCC has gone through the Qatar crisis that shook the unity among the members of the organisation. The approach of the individual member states towards Iran has changed considerably. Despite the differences, the GCC maintains that the Iranian desire to acquire nuclear weapons is a threat to the security of the GCC countries.

Over the years, the relationship of the individual GCC member states with Iran has changed. Although the individual member states of the GCC have maintained different levels of relationship with Iran, the GCC as a collective has taken a uniform stand on most of the issues relating to Iran. For Saudi Arabia, Iran has remained the arch-rival. After a long period, both countries initiated a series of official-level talks facilitated by Iraq. The crisis in Yemen seems to be the major point of discussion. Given the history of their rivalry and competition in the region and the high stakes both countries have in the region, any major change in their approach towards each other seems unlikely in the immediate future.

Over time, the nature of bilateral relations between individual GCC member states and Iran has evolved, reflecting varying national interests and strategic calculations. While the individual GCC states have maintained differing degrees of engagement with Iran, the GCC as a collective has generally adopted a unified stance on key issues concerning Iranian regional behaviour and nuclear ambitions. Among the GCC states, Saudi Arabia has historically viewed Iran as its principal regional rival, with tensions rooted in sectarian, geopolitical and ideological differences. The conflict in Yemen has emerged as a key point of contention, reflecting the deep entanglement of both nations in the country's prolonged crisis. But both countries signed an agreement in 2023 mediated by China, and agreed to restore their diplomatic relationship. This agreement has the potential to change the Saudi–Iran relationship in the future and thus change the regional politics and security in the Gulf.

Bahrain has maintained a firm stance against Iran, frequently accusing Tehran of interfering in its domestic affairs by allegedly encouraging unrest among its Shia population. This perception has further strained Bahrain–Iran relations and reinforced the broader GCC scepticism toward Iran's regional intentions. But in the aftermath of the Saudi–Iran rapprochement, Bahrain has also expressed optimism in restoring its relationship with Iran.

The UAE criticises Iran on political and security issues, while maintaining a strong economic relationship with it. The UAE has a long-standing territorial dispute with Iran over three islands in the Persian Gulf – Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. All three islands are under Iranian occupation, which claims that these islands were handed over to them by the British.⁷ The GCC, on the other hand, supports the UAE's claim to these islands. Located in the middle of the Persian Gulf waters, these islands provide both tactical and strategic advantages to Iran. Iran has opened military bases in these islands, which are frequently visited by senior military officials, further adding to the woes of the UAE.

Oman has traditionally pursued a policy of neutrality and strategic independence in matters of regional geopolitics and security, including its approach toward Iran. Unlike other GCC member states, Oman has maintained constructive and stable relations with Iran, emphasising diplomacy and dialogue over confrontation. This approach is grounded in Muscat's belief

that engagement with Iran offers significant economic opportunities, particularly in the energy sector. Furthermore, Oman played a pivotal role as a mediator and host for negotiations between Iran and the United States that eventually led to the signing of the JCPOA. Given its geographic proximity and shared maritime boundaries with Iran in the Gulf of Oman, Oman's foreign policy towards Iran has traditionally been characterised by pragmatism and accommodation. However, this conciliatory stance has at times created friction with other GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia,⁸ which views Iran through a lens of strategic competition and rivalry.

Qatar has significantly consolidated its relationship with Iran over the past few years, especially during the imposition of the boycott. Qatar shares the largest gas field in the Persian Gulf with Iran. Its economic relationship and interdependence with Iran have significantly increased. Besides, Qatar also perceives Iran as a reliable partner and believes engagement on geopolitical and security issues in the region could be beneficial. Similarly, Kuwait has also been engaging with Iran in recent years. Its economic engagement with Iran is steadily increasing, and it is also often found to be adopting a moderate position towards Iran over the regional issues.⁹ It, in fact, played a key role in restoring the unity of the GCC in the aftermath of the Qatar crisis.

While the GCC member states collectively oppose certain aspects of Iran's regional policies – particularly those related to security, stability and the balance of power – many have opted to engage with Tehran through bilateral channels. This approach allows them to sidestep contentious issues in multilateral forums, thereby preserving diplomatic flexibility. However, these divergent bilateral strategies have significant implications for the internal cohesion of the GCC. The varying national approaches to Iran underscore underlying fractures within the organisation and raise questions about its long-term unity and effectiveness. Managing their differences over Iran while maintaining their individual relations bilaterally would remain a challenge for the GCC member states. Given the current regional dynamics – marked by heightened tensions, competing geopolitical interests and inconsistent policy positions among GCC members – a comprehensive rapprochement between the GCC and Iran appears unlikely in the near term. As a result, Iran will likely continue to serve as a persistent source of division within the GCC, complicating efforts to present a unified regional stance.

Muslim Brotherhood Challenge

The Muslim Brotherhood has emerged as a significant factor undermining the unity of the GCC, primarily due to stark divergences among member states in their perceptions and policies toward the organisation. The Muslim Brotherhood's presence in the Gulf dates back to the 1960s, when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser initiated a heavy crackdown on its leadership, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of many of its members. Many of the leaders and cadres were given refuge by the Gulf sheikhdoms. The Gulf monarchies, wary of Nasser's rising global influence, offered refuge to displaced Muslim Brotherhood figures. The Muslim Brotherhood cadres who moved to the Gulf were educated and were integrated into local institutions, particularly in the realm of religious education. Over time, their continued presence facilitated the diffusion of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology across generations in the region. However, the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence has varied significantly across GCC states, shaped by differing domestic political environments, the nature of their engagement with ruling elites and their involvement in social and political spheres. Consequently, the Gulf states have adopted markedly divergent policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood, reflecting broader differences in political ideologies, governance models and threat perceptions within the GCC.¹⁰

In Saudi Arabia, their presence continued to grow in the 1950s and 1960s. Though the Saudi rulers welcomed them into the Kingdom despite the differences in their ideology, it was highly averse to the clandestine activities run by the Muslim Brotherhood. Their association with the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda elicited a fierce response from the Saudi royal family. A major difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Al Saud regime occurred with the beginning of the Gulf War in 1990. While Saudi Arabia invited the American troops to the Kingdom, the Muslim Brotherhood was opposed to any kind of foreign military presence¹¹ as it was fundamentally opposed to the West at both political and ideological levels. Similarly, in the aftermath of the beginning of the protests in Egypt in 2011, a number of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated leaders and clerics raised slogans in support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Saudi Arabia soon started a nationwide crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood leaders, and in 2014, designated the organisation as a terrorist group. Subsequently, the Muslim Brotherhood

became one of the most important reasons that led to the boycott of Qatar in 2017.

The Muslim Brotherhood's presence in the UAE has gradually strengthened over the decades since the formation of the Emirates. They have formed an organisation called Al Islah, which follows the Brotherhood's political and religious ideology in the UAE. Like in Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood has also entered into the education and other government sectors in the country. In recent years, especially in the aftermath of the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Emirati government has launched a heavy crackdown on the leaders associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Emirati government views the Muslim Brotherhood as a subversive force, accusing it of plotting against the state, thereby reinforcing the perception of the group as a significant security threat. In 2014, the UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. The UAE detests the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, believing it to have hijacked the Islamic faith.¹² It also believes that the Muslim Brotherhood, like other terrorist organisations, is involved in recruiting youths and intends to fill the vacuum in the region created by the Arab unrest, gain access to weapons and sow the seeds of extremism.¹³

Qatar has supported the Muslim Brotherhood by providing them with political, ideological and financial support. In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood members helped Qatar in establishing its educational, administrative and bureaucratic system in the 1950s and 1960s when it had a very small population and it lacked educated and trained manpower to carry out official and teaching jobs.¹⁴ Since then, Qatar has continuously engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar has never felt ideologically challenged or politically insecure with the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country. As a result, Qatar has emerged as a key supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. The beginning of the Arab unrest provided fresh opportunities for the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood's ascension to power in Egypt in 2012 further expanded and consolidated the relationship between Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. Later on, this emerged as a major issue of discord among the GCC member states.

Kuwait has a strong tradition of political participation by the people, with regular elections held to elect members to the 50-member National

Assembly.¹⁵ In Kuwait, the most democratic country in the region, the Muslim Brotherhood participates in national politics and is elected to the Kuwaiti National Assembly. Among all the GCC countries, Kuwait has been the most accommodating of the Muslim Brotherhood in its domestic political and social affairs. Unlike in Egypt, they have not been involved in any violent activities or have challenged the ruling Al Sabah family. During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Muslim Brotherhood played a key role by working for the liberation of Kuwait and providing food and other social services to the people in their resistance to the Iraqi forces.¹⁶ Established in Kuwait in the early 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood has become deeply embedded in the social fabric as well as the political affairs of Kuwait. Therefore, the Kuwaiti government does not perceive them as a threat to its regime security or the internal law and order situation of the country.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain is involved in social and charity activities. Muslim-Brotherhood-backed candidates have been elected to the Bahraini Parliament as well. The Muslim Brotherhood has supported the royal family in Bahrain on political matters.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood has not been able to gain any stronghold in Oman as the Sultanate has adopted a strong policy against it. A number of activists suspected to be linked to the Muslim Brotherhood have been arrested, and, on some occasions, released from jail after being pardoned by the ruler. Oman has also withdrawn the citizenship of some of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country.¹⁸ The Omani government has taken strong measures not to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to establish any organised group or network in the country.

The electoral successes of Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia, following the Arab uprisings, served as a warning bell to regimes like those in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, highlighting the potential for political mobilisation by Islamist actors within their own countries. These developments raised concerns about the domestic implications of political Islam and its destabilising potential. Simultaneously, they revealed the divergent perspectives among GCC member states regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. The varying threat perceptions and geopolitical calculations related to the Muslim Brotherhood's presence in the region have

since remained a critical source of tension, affecting the unity and internal cohesion of the GCC as a regional organisation.

Challenges from an Unstable Yemen

The continuing instability in Yemen has brought up a number of new challenges for the GCC. The conflict in Yemen has posed security challenges to some of the individual GCC countries and, at the same time, it has been a critical issue in the internal cohesion of the organisation. From the very beginning of the protest against the then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the GCC has been deeply involved in the Yemen crisis. Initially, the GCC backed President Saleh but as the protests continued to spread and gathered strength, the GCC realised that the intensity of popular discontent against the president is severe; and thus, it came out with the 'GCC Initiative', which called for Saleh's resignation in exchange for immunity, and the convening of a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) with the participation of diverse Yemeni stakeholders to chart a post-Saleh political roadmap. Although the GCC initiative appeared to provide a viable framework for political transition, its implementation faltered when the Houthis rejected the NDC's outcomes and launched a military campaign to seize the capital, Sanaa, thereby plunging the country into a deeper conflict. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was the vice president, became the President of the country in 2012 after the removal of Saleh amid the continuing instability in the country.

Following the failure to contain the Houthi advance, in 2015, President Hadi appealed to the United Nations for international support. In response, a Saudi-led military coalition was established with the stated objective of restoring the legitimacy of the internationally recognised Hadi government. The coalition supported Yemeni government forces and sought to drive the Houthis back to their stronghold in Sada province. However, the intervention revealed significant divergences within the GCC regarding the military operation in Yemen. While most GCC member states supported and participated in the military campaign, Oman notably adopted a distinct position. Consistent with its traditional foreign policy approach of neutrality and mediation, Oman refrained from joining the military coalition. It advocated for a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, arguing that a military solution would be ineffective and potentially destabilising. Additionally, Oman expressed concern that

military confrontation against the Houthis could provoke retaliatory actions, thereby endangering its national security. As a result, Oman remained the only GCC member to abstain from military participation in the Yemeni conflict, highlighting the internal policy divergences within the organisation.

At the organisation level, the GCC has committed itself to reaching a political resolution of the Yemen crisis, and it has also hosted intra-Yemen talks in order to reach a negotiated settlement of all the issues concerned. In the aftermath of the boycott in 2017, Qatar withdrew its armed forces stationed in Saudi Arabia, fighting against the Houthis. After Qatar withdrew from the military coalition, the Hadi government accused Qatar of supporting the Houthis as the former had joined hands with Iran for survival after the boycott. Qatar was also alleged to be providing funding to the Houthis and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood-backed organisations in Yemen. Qatar has rejected all these allegations¹⁹ and countered by stating that it had deployed its military to protect the Saudi borders.

Prior to the escalation of the Yemeni crisis, Qatar had played a mediatory role between the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi movement during periods of intermittent conflict in 2007 and 2008. The security of Yemen holds critical importance for the GCC member states, as instability within Yemen has direct and far-reaching implications for regional security. Since the launch of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in 2015, Saudi Arabia has been subjected to numerous missile and drone attacks by the Houthis. These attacks have targeted vital infrastructure, including oil facilities, airports and military installations, and have occasionally struck civilian areas. Despite intercepting a significant number of these projectiles, Saudi Arabia continues to face persistent security threats emanating from Houthi-controlled territories in Yemen. Similarly, the UAE has also been targeted by Houthi missile and drone strikes, underscoring the broader regional dimension of the conflict and its implications for the internal security of GCC states.

Oman, despite being Yemen's neighbouring country, has never been attacked by the Houthis as Oman is not involved in the military operation against them. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE allege that Iran is behind the Houthis and is supplying weapons as well as funding to the group. This further complicates the regional security dynamics as these countries believe that Iran

is using the Houthis as a proxy to launch attacks on them. Since the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia was reached in March 2023, there has been a marked change in the pattern of war in Yemen. The Houthis and Saudi leaders have met for talks to find a way out of the situation. But the beginning of the Israel– Hamas War and the Houthis’ declaration of support for Hamas have brought them to the forefront.

GCC and the Syrian Crisis

The relationship between the GCC member states and the regime of President Bashar Al Assad in Syria was always adversarial. Assad’s close strategic alignment with Iran and Russia, coupled with his strained relationship with the United States, positioned his regime at odds with the geopolitical interests of the GCC states. The outbreak of popular protests in Syria in 2011, as part of the broader wave of Arab uprisings, was perceived by the United States and several GCC states as an opportunity to pursue regime change in Damascus. As the protests intensified, the Assad regime responded with forceful suppression, employing coercive measures to dismantle the opposition movement. This violent crackdown precipitated widespread political instability, internal displacement, military defections and a deepening humanitarian crisis. The worsening situation drew the attention and involvement of a range of regional and international actors, transforming the Syrian conflict into a highly internationalised proxy war. The Lebanese Hezbollah later intervened in support of the Assad regime, reinforcing Iran’s role in the conflict. Meanwhile, the United States, Russia, Iran, Türkiye and the GCC states emerged as principal stakeholders in the Syrian crisis. While Russia and Iran provided direct military and political support to the Assad regime, the United States and the GCC states condemned the regime’s human rights violations and called for a political transition in Syria.

In the initial phase of the Syrian uprising, GCC member states called for political reform and restraint on the part of the Assad regime. However, as the protests gained momentum and the regime’s response became increasingly repressive, the GCC states believed that diplomatic and political efforts to persuade President Assad had failed. Consequently, they shifted their stance, advocating for the arming of opposition forces as the only viable alternative.

In a diplomatic move, the GCC countries withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus and expelled Syrian envoys from their respective capitals. Subsequently, the GCC adopted a position that emphasised the preservation of Syria's unity and territorial integrity, the eradication of terrorism and the necessity of President Assad's resignation as a prerequisite for any meaningful political transition. In November 2012, the GCC formally recognised the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.²⁰ This recognition was intended to facilitate the delivery of military and financial support to the opposition while simultaneously delegitimising Assad's claim to leadership. The GCC justified this move as essential for overcoming legal and political obstacles in supporting the opposition and for accelerating the process of political change in Syria.

For the GCC, the strong Iran–Syria relationship emerged as a strong geopolitical challenge. The GCC countries perceived Assad as a major regional ally of Iran, as the latter has the ambition to expand its influence in the region. They also believed that a sectarian political dimension was also at play, as Assad is an Alawite Shia and was a partner of Iran in its regional ambition of establishing a Shia arc to dominate the region.

But despite all the GCC countries speaking in one voice against President Assad and supporting the opposition coalition politically, financially and militarily, there were some differences between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Syria. The opposition coalition against Assad consisted of several groups with different political and religious ideologies. While Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood in the opposition coalition, Saudi Arabia supported the Salafi organisation against Assad.²¹ Although both these elements were fighting against the Assad regime, differences emerged in the ranks of the opposition over the ideologies and political positions on specific issues.

Saud Al Faisal, the then Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, stated that in the face of the violent action by the regime, it was a 'duty' to arm the Syrian opposition to defend themselves.²² Saudi Arabia denounced the Assad regime's brutalities as 'crimes against humanity.'²³ Qatari Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani urged the Arab countries to intervene in Syria out of 'national, humanitarian, political and military duties'.²⁴ Qatar called for Assad to step

down and stated that the tyranny of the regime should come to an end. Qatar argued that a number of terrorist organisations have emerged to fill the void in the absence of a well-organised opposition to the Assad regime, and therefore, it is the responsibility of the international community to support the Syrian opposition.²⁵ Similarly, the Kuwaiti parliament appealed to the ruler to cut off all ties with the Assad regime and to support the Syrian opposition forces. The GCC countries termed the atrocities of the Syrian regime a crime against humanity and appealed to the United Nations for a strong deterrent action against the Assad regime.²⁶ To make matters worse, the Assad regime used chemical weapons against the opposition forces. The GCC called the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime a 'heinous crime' and called upon the United Nations to adopt necessary measures against Assad and hold the regime accountable according to the established principles of international law and the UN charter.²⁷

Throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, the GCC states backed the Syrian opposition forces, provided financial and military support to fight terrorism in Syria, provided financial support for the Syrian refugees and appealed to maintain the unity and sovereignty of the country. But with the changing regional geopolitical situation, Syria's relationship with some of the GCC member states also changed. The UAE and Bahrain re-established diplomatic ties with the Assad regime. President Assad visited the UAE in March 2022 and discussed the prospects of expanding cooperation with the Emirati leadership.²⁸

Earlier, in December 2018, the UAE and Bahrain announced to reopen their embassies in Damascus. Later in March 2019, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, stated that the UAE's decision to re-establish diplomatic ties with Syria was primarily because of the absence of an Arab role in Syrian politics and security, and simultaneously, there is a growing involvement of Iran and Türkiye in Syria.²⁹ Bahrain also made statements on similar lines, focusing on strengthening the role of Arab countries to maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity and to prevent interference by other regional powers in the internal affairs of Syria.³⁰ Finally, in May 2023, in the Arab League's 32nd summit held in Jeddah, Assad was brought back to the organisation after

it was suspended in 2011. Both Assad and the Arab League leaders hailed Arab unity and solidarity.³¹

However, a significant change took place in Syria on December 8, 2024, when Assad was forced to leave the country. The opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against the Assad's military and captured power. Ahmed Al Sharaa, the HTS leader, was appointed as the new president of Syria. It posed a dilemma for the foreign policy of the Gulf countries to adapt to the new realities in Damascus. However, the dilemma did not continue for long as Al Sharaa visited Saudi Arabia in March 2025, signalling a shift in the Gulf countries' approach to accepting him as the new leader of Syria. Furthermore, during President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2025, Al Sharaa was also invited to meet with Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Thus, over the last 15 years of the Syrian civil war, the GCC countries have spoken in one voice over the broad principles of maintaining Syria's sovereignty and independence, countering terrorism and supporting the Syrian refugees. But there have been minor differences between them as well, which have been managed successfully. The Saudi–Qatari differences over the latter supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria were one of the reasons that led to the boycott of Qatar in 2017. The GCC countries have come a long way in the Syrian conflict – from demanding that Assad step down to recognising the opposition coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, and now recognising the new regime led by Ahmed Al Sharaa.

Terrorism and Extremism

The challenges from terrorism and violent extremism in the Gulf region remain extremely high. In the aftermath of the beginning of the Arab unrest, several terrorist organisations cropped up in different parts of the West Asian and North African region. The terrorist organisations, which were earlier present and were hiding underground, became active as the protests continued in the streets, and the rulers, as well as the military and security establishment, were busy and occupied with the protesters. Taking the opportunity of the continuing chaos, Al Qaeda strengthened its organisation and intensified its activities in many parts of the region, especially in the countries which faced

regime change or strong protests against the rulers. Al Qaeda's terror network in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya not only expanded their terror activities but was also able to capture territories in these countries. In some countries, the authorities have recaptured the territories from the terrorists' control, while in other countries, they continue to capture large tracts of territory.

The emergence of ISIS and the subsequent announcement of a caliphate by carving out territories of Iraq and Syria was the most perturbing developments in the region. The caliphate not only affected Iraq and Syria but also quickly spread its ideology, activities and impact throughout the region in a short span of time. For the Gulf countries, the implications of the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria were twofold: firstly, a number of their nationals travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the caliphate; and secondly, they were facing terrorist attacks in their territories orchestrated by ISIS. A large number of radicalised individuals from the Gulf region travelled to Iraq and Syria. The maximum number of fighters from the GCC was from Saudi Arabia, which came as a huge embarrassment for the Kingdom. In a report published in 2017, the New York-based Soufan Centre found that 3244 terrorists from Saudi Arabia and 150 terrorists from Kuwait joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.³² The same report suggests that while 760 terrorists returned to Saudi Arabia, not a single terrorist returned to Kuwait.³³

Besides, ISIS launched several terrorist attacks on Saudi Arabia targeting the Shia minorities, religious clerics, security forces and foreign nationals. By attacking the Shia places of worship, ISIS intended to inflame sectarian tension in the Kingdom. Its attack on the Sunni religious clerics was to reiterate the point that the Kingdom was not following the teachings of Islam and that the religious leaders close to the establishment are also responsible for it. For ISIS, the Kingdom, with the two holiest sites of Mecca and Medina, was the natural target for both symbolic and practical reasons. ISIS questioned the legitimacy and credentials of the Kingdom, stating that the Kingdom is not ruled as per Islamic law.³⁴ In August 2018, ISIS leader Abubaker Al Baghdadi condemned Saudi Arabia and alleged that the Kingdom 'is trying to secularise its inhabitants and ultimately destroy Islam' and then urged the Saudi citizens to overthrow their government.³⁵ The Armed Conflict Survey 2020 states that there are a large number of untracked returnees who have returned to their own countries

from the ISIS caliphate but have not been detected or prosecuted by the state authorities.³⁶ They represent a significant threat to the security of these countries.³⁷ They can also disturb the social and communal harmony as they can themselves carry out terrorist attacks or can possibly radicalise others to indulge in terror activities. For the Gulf states, these are complex challenges to be dealt with immediately.

Besides Saudi Arabia, Kuwait also suffered terrorist attacks by ISIS. In June 2015, ISIS attacked a Shia Mosque in the Kuwaiti capital city, killing 27 people and injuring more than 200 people.³⁸ This was the first ISIS attack on Kuwait, which is known to be a politically stable and non-controversial country in the Gulf region. This attack reflected the fragile security situation in the Gulf, and all the Gulf countries started taking radical measures to stop such attacks in their countries. This was also an attempt by ISIS to flare up sectarian tension in the country. The Kuwaiti government was quick to step in and appealed for peace. The GCC Secretary General also condemned the attack, stating that it is against 'Islamic values'.³⁹

A major concern of the Gulf countries was that the terrorists returning from the caliphate could be involved in launching terrorist attacks within their countries, radicalise people and instigate some sections of the populace against the ruling regimes. The Gulf countries adopted a number of measures to check ISIS attacks. Efforts were made to stop people from travelling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. They also designated ISIS as a terrorist organisation and monitored suspicious activities by local extremist groups and spoiled their plots to launch attacks. Furthermore, several steps were taken by the Gulf countries to check the flow of funds from the region reaching the hands of ISIS.⁴⁰

Amid the ongoing conflict and state collapse in Yemen, ISIS sought to exploit the prevailing chaos to establish a presence in the country. Yemen has long remained a stronghold for Al Qaeda, particularly the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which emerged in the 1990s as a significant security threat to Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom experienced a series of terrorist attacks attributed to AQAP, prompting it to invest heavily – both politically and economically – in supporting then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's efforts to eliminate the Al Qaeda threat. Despite these efforts, President Saleh was unable

to eliminate AQAP's entrenched networks within Yemen. Following the eruption of protests and the subsequent breakdown of internal order, AQAP expanded its operations and succeeded in seizing large swathes of territory, particularly in the southern regions of the country, where it continues to maintain a presence. The subsequent emergence of ISIS in Yemen has introduced an additional layer of complexity to the region's security environment. Although ISIS has struggled to gain a firm foothold due to the already crowded landscape of radical militant groups, it has nonetheless managed to carry out numerous terrorist attacks, including high-profile suicide bombings.⁴¹ The presence of ISIS in Yemen poses a direct security challenge for the GCC countries – Saudi Arabia, in particular, as it shares a long and porous border with Yemen.

The Troubled Saudi–Qatar Relationship

The bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has been characterised by underlying tensions and strategic divergences. The relationship between them got strained in 1995 when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani captured power in a royal coup, deposing his father, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani. The capturing of power by Sheikh Hamad did not go well with Saudi Arabia, as Sheikh Khalifa was a Saudi ally, and his policies were favourable for Riyadh.

A key turning point occurred in 1996, when a failed coup attempt sought to depose Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani shortly after he assumed power. Qatar accused Saudi Arabia of complicity in the attempted coup, which significantly strained diplomatic relations. Following his rise to power, Sheikh Hamad pursued a more assertive and independent foreign policy that often diverged from, and at times directly challenged, Saudi Arabia's regional interests. Qatar's diplomatic outreach to countries, such as Iran, Türkiye and Israel, under Sheikh Hamad further exacerbated tensions with Riyadh. These policy differences, particularly on matters of regional security and geopolitical alignment, contributed to a deepening sense of mistrust between the two states. Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar continued to maintain formal engagement within the institutional framework of the GCC, their bilateral relations remained marked by competition, a persistent trust deficit and divergent threat

perceptions. The voluntary abdication of Sheikh Hamad in favour of his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, in 2013 was also viewed with suspicion in Riyadh, further complicating the already fragile relationship. Besides, the Qatari satellite television channel *Al Jazeera* has been yet another issue of contention between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as the latter has often alleged that the channel has indulged in airing anti-Saudi content and providing space to anti-Saudi voices. Saudi Arabia believes that Qatar is using *Al Jazeera* as a tool against the Kingdom.

The contentious relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has been a key issue of discord within the GCC. Both countries have been vying for regional influence and have often been found to be adopting divergent policy approaches on regional security and foreign relations. As the largest power in the organisation, Saudi Arabia has frequently sought to dominate and influence regional developments. Qatar, being a wealthy country and nurturing an ambition of playing a role in the region and beyond, has often been seen as not conforming to the Saudi-dominated regional order in the Gulf. The US Air Force base being present at the Al Udeid Air Base near Doha gives it confidence that its security will not be breached as long as the US forces are deployed in the country.⁴²

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has been at the centre of the Qatar crisis. Qatar has adopted a proactive foreign policy since the beginning of the Arab unrest. Qatar played an active role in conflict zones, such as Libya, Syria and Yemen. It engaged proactively with Mohammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, which in turn, was trying to rebuild ties with Iran. Such proactive Qatari policies in the region emerged as a challenge for the leadership of Saudi Arabia in the region. Qatar used its political and economic clout to influence the developments in the region during a time the region was undergoing a lot of turbulence. For Saudi Arabia, such Qatari activities are a challenge to its influence in the region. Differences between the two countries continued to grow and later became difficult to reconcile. Perception of Saudi Arabia and Qatar towards the Muslim Brotherhood is another issue of contention between the two. For Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood is a challenge and a liability, while Qatar sees it as a tool to leverage its power in the region.⁴³

Qatar's association with the Muslim Brotherhood has posed a significant ideological and political challenge to Saudi Arabia. Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt following the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak was a major source of friction between the two states, particularly as Riyadh viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a destabilising force within the region. Qatar's close ties with Türkiye – another country accused of hosting and supporting numerous Muslim Brotherhood leaders and affiliates – have further strained its relations with Saudi Arabia. In the context of the Syrian conflict, although both Riyadh and Doha supported the opposition to President Bashar Al Assad, their backing diverged along ideological lines. Saudi Arabia predominantly supported Salafi factions, whereas Qatar aligned itself with groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Both states have provided varying degrees of ideological and financial assistance to their respective proxies, highlighting a broader pattern of geopolitical rivalry and competing visions for regional order within the GCC framework.

GCC and the Israel– Hamas War

The Israel– Hamas War brought significant challenges for the Gulf countries. The organisation did not explicitly condemn the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Rather, it held Israel responsible for the situation, appealed for an immediate ceasefire and protection of civilians. In its meetings, the GCC has held Israel responsible for the violence in Gaza, the deteriorating humanitarian situation, and has appealed for the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from Gaza. They have condemned the Israeli attacks as 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing' in Gaza. It has reaffirmed its position on the Palestinian issue that an independent Palestinian state be established on the basis of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.⁴⁴

The response of the individual GCC countries varied from one another. They have condemned the Israeli military operation in Gaza and the consequent humanitarian crisis. They have also condemned the displacement of people and have appealed for more aid to be delivered to Gaza.

Saudi Arabia played an important role in rallying support of the Arab and Islamic countries through the regional organisations such as the GCC, OIC and the Arab League for the Palestinian cause.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia was also vocal

in raising the issue of Gaza at the United Nations. It also provided humanitarian support to Gaza through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief). The Hamas attack on Israel came at a time when there were reports of talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia towards normalising their relationship. It was alleged by US President Joe Biden that the Hamas attack was intended to disrupt the regional geopolitics and balance of power in West Asia.⁴⁶

Qatar also condemned the Israeli strikes on Gaza. Having a good relationship with Hamas has been mediating in the conflict, along with the United States and Egypt. Doha has been the venue of a number of rounds of dialogue between Israel and Hamas. Qatar has played an important role in the release of the Israeli hostages and a number of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

Since 2020, the UAE and Bahrain – two GCC member states – have signed normalisation agreements with Israel and have established diplomatic ties. The Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli declaration of war on Hamas emerged as a diplomatic challenge for these two countries. The UAE has also condemned the Israeli attack on Gaza and stated that the collective punishment of the people of Gaza should be stopped. It supported the UNSC Resolution 2712 (2023) that called for ‘immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups and for the supply of humanitarian aid and medical services to the people of Gaza.’⁴⁷ The UAE has delivered materials for the establishment of a field hospital in the Gaza Strip under the supervision of a UAE medical team. It has also received a number of children from Gaza to UAE hospitals for treatment.⁴⁸

Bahrain has condemned the Israeli aggression on Gaza and withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv. It has also strongly condemned the Hamas attack on Israel as ‘barbaric and horrific’.⁴⁹ Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain, identified the redlines in the Israel–Hamas War, such as no forced displacement of people in Gaza, no reoccupation of Gaza, no reduction in Gaza’s territory and no terror attacks on Israel from Gaza.⁵⁰ Bahrain has also provided food and medical supplies to Gaza.

Oman did not condemn the Hamas attack on Israel and instead ‘called on both parties to exercise maximum restraint and the need to protect civilians’. It rather stated that the current escalation is a result of the ‘continued illegal

Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories'.⁵¹ Kuwait expressed grave concern over the escalation between Israel and the Palestinians. It blamed the Israeli policy of occupation and expanding settlements as the reasons for the situation.⁵² It also demanded a ceasefire and humanitarian aid delivery to the people of Gaza.

The Israel– Hamas War reached close to their Gulf neighbourhood when the Houthis of Yemen declared their support for Hamas and started firing rockets at Israel. The Houthis attacked ships passing through the strategically important Strait of Bab El Mandeb and the Red Sea. The US, UK and their partner countries started Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea in order to ensure the freedom of navigation and maritime security in the region. Bahrain was the only GCC country to have participated in the operation. The Houthi attacks on the ships have forced the shipping companies to take the longer route via the Cape of Good Hope to reach Europe. This has significantly increased the transit time and cost of the shipping operations.

GCC and the Israel–Iran 12-Day War

In the midst of its war against Hamas, Israel launched 'Operation Rising Lion' on June 13, 2025, against Iran. Israel stated that the main objective of Operation Rising Lion was to degrade Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Israel believed that Iran was nearing the development of a nuclear weapon. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that if not stopped, 'Iran could produce a nuclear weapon in a very short time'.⁵³ Israel also believed that Iran was approaching a 'point of no return' in its nuclear programme.⁵⁴ Israel targeted Iranian nuclear sites, including Arak, Natanz, Isfahan and Fordow and Iranian ballistic missile sites in order to degrade Iranian nuclear and missile programmes. It carried out airstrikes and drone attacks on multiple targets in Iran that were aimed at Iranian military officials and prominent nuclear scientists. A number of Iranian military personnel, including the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and nine prominent nuclear scientists, were killed in the Israeli attacks.

In retaliation, Iran launched 'Operation True Promise 3' and fired a barrage of missiles and drones at Israel with the objective of defending the country from Israeli attacks. Iran attacked Israel with more than 550 missiles and over

1,000 UAVs.⁵⁵ While most of these were intercepted, some of them have hit their targets in Israel, causing substantial damage. The War took a decisive turn on June 22, 2025, with the participation of the United States under 'Operation Midnight Hammer' when it used bunker buster bombs to hit the Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan.

But unlike the Israel–Hamas War, the GCC countries unitedly condemned the Israeli attacks on Iran, reflecting a shared concern over escalating tensions in the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE restored their diplomatic relations following the Saudi–Iran rapprochement in March 2023. Bahrain is also pursuing a similar course to restore diplomatic ties with Iran. They were concerned about the escalation in their neighbourhood and its broader implications for regional security and stability. Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz is also another grave concern for them, as that could disrupt the maritime traffic and pose a risk to their economy.

However, the GCC countries' response to the US military action on Iran was largely restrained. The situation in the region took yet another turn on June 22, 2025, when Iran launched missiles targeting the Al Udeid airbase in Qatar, a key military facility operated by the US. Most of these missiles were intercepted by the US and Qatari defence systems. Qatar immediately condemned the Iranian missile attack on its territory and called it a violation of its sovereignty.⁵⁶ Displaying GCC solidarity, other GCC member states also collectively condemned the Iranian attack on Qatar, reiterating that any 'threat to any member state is a direct threat to all GCC states'.⁵⁷ Thus, the GCC has changed its position towards the wars in its neighbourhood according to its regional alignments, threat perceptions and its commitment to support the Palestinian cause.

Conclusion

The GCC is confronted with a multitude of complex and evolving challenges that demand a unified and coordinated response from all the member states. As regional threats intensify and grow increasingly multifaceted, it becomes evident that no single country can effectively address these issues in isolation. Fragmentation within the GCC – characterised by member states prioritising national interests – serves only to exacerbate these challenges and undermines

collective efforts. Therefore, a cohesive and strategic approach, grounded in mutual cooperation and shared interests, is essential for the GCC to effectively navigate the region's pressing security, political and economic concerns.

Given the prevailing differences among its member states, preserving internal unity and ensuring the continued relevance of the organisation remain the utmost priorities for the GCC. Persistent disagreements over geopolitical and security matters have significantly undermined the GCC's internal cohesion. The growing assertiveness of certain member states in attempting to shape the regional order and the resistance of others to accept that have contributed to the protraction of conflicts across the Gulf region.

The bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has played a particularly pivotal role in influencing the unity of the GCC. As the largest and most influential member, Saudi Arabia, often supported by the UAE and Bahrain, seeks to steer the regional agenda. In contrast, Qatar has consistently resisted aligning its foreign policy with a Saudi-led regional framework. Despite its small size and population, Qatar's considerable wealth and strategic ambition have enabled it to pursue an independent and proactive regional policy. The divergence in their foreign policy orientations has been evident in various regional theatres, including Syria, Yemen and Egypt. The 2017 Qatar crisis can be viewed as a direct manifestation of the deep-rooted tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, reflecting broader structural challenges to GCC unity.

The relationship between the United States and the member states of the GCC constitutes a foundational pillar of regional security and stability in the Gulf. This strategic partnership not only contributes to the broader geopolitical balance in the region but also plays a significant role in reinforcing the internal cohesion and organisational relevance of the GCC. The prevailing status quo in this relationship is mutually beneficial; any substantial shift in these dynamics risks undermining regional peace and stability.

Although intra-GCC unity can potentially be restored through sustained negotiation and dialogue, the erosion of the organisation's relevance presents a more formidable challenge. The GCC has established itself as a significant regional body engaging with major global actors on a wide range of issues, including politics, security, culture, economics and energy. A decline in its

credibility and effectiveness on the international stage would have far-reaching implications, weaken its strategic influence and diminish its capacity to act as a unified regional bloc. Preserving the organisation's institutional integrity and external standing is, therefore, essential for its continued relevance and effectiveness in addressing regional challenges.

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5

India and the GCC

India and the GCC countries share deep-rooted historical and civilisational ties that date back to ancient times. Their interactions have encompassed trade, religion, culture and sustained people-to-people exchanges. Before technological advancements, people from both regions crossed the Arabian Sea using traditional knowledge of seasonal winds to sail their boats for trade and commerce. This facilitated the exchange of goods, religion and culture, as well as the movement of people, religious leaders and scholars between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula. In the contemporary era, such interactions have not only expanded in scope but also grown significantly stronger. There is now greater convergence of interests between India and the Gulf region, covering political, economic, security and strategic issues. The Gulf countries have reciprocated India's initiatives, and with shifting political and security dynamics in the Gulf, alongside India's rising profile on the international stage, both recognise the importance of collaborating to achieve cooperation across multiple fields.

The wave of political unrest that swept across the Arab world beginning in December 2010 posed significant challenges to the regional geopolitics and security of Arab states. India, like many other countries, adopted a cautious and measured approach to these developments, closely observing the evolving political dynamics while refraining from direct involvement. India was most concerned about the situation in the Gulf region, where it holds substantial economic and strategic interests, including energy security, trade relations and

a large expatriate workforce. Soon after the protests and violence on the streets subsided, India quickly engaged with these countries, offering them all possible assistance and support.

India has several economic, political and strategic interests with the GCC countries. India considers the region its 'extended neighbourhood' and 'economic hinterland'. Approximately, 60 per cent of India's total energy is imported from the region, which underscores the region's critical role in ensuring India's energy security. The GCC collectively constitutes one of India's most significant trading blocs, with bilateral trade exceeding US\$178.5 billion annually. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have emerged as key economic partners of India. In addition to economic ties, the presence of approximately nine million Indian nationals in the GCC countries constitutes a natural link between the two sides, while their safety and welfare remain a major concern for India.

Until recently, trade and business were the primary focus of India's relationship with the region. Over the past two decades, this relationship has undergone a strategic recalibration and has expanded to include political, security and strategic issues. There has been a noticeable shift in India's approach, aiming to transform the engagements from a 'buyer-seller relationship' towards establishing long-term strategic partnerships. The signing of defence cooperation agreements and partnerships in security-related fields, such as counterterrorism, intelligence sharing and maritime security, has boosted confidence and further strengthened the ties.

India's Think West Policy

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, India's approach towards the West Asian region, particularly the GCC countries, has been highly proactive and strategically focused. India's relationship with individual GCC countries has received a significant boost across political, economic, security and strategic fields in the Modi era. Prime Minister Modi has visited all the GCC countries, which has revitalised and energised the existing relationships. He has focused not only on strengthening bilateral trade, commerce and energy partnerships but also on engaging in security and defence fields with the GCC countries. As part of India's extended neighbourhood, the GCC nations have

received renewed attention from the government and have transitioned from the earlier Look West policy to a new and revitalised 'Think West policy'. This redefined policy reflects India's intention to adopt a more focused and forward-looking engagement with the GCC based on strategic convergence and mutual interests.

India has deepened its strategic partnership with the GCC countries. India signed a strategic partnership agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2019. This resulted in the creation of the Strategic Partnership Council and will further deepen cooperation in areas such as defence, security, counter-terrorism, energy security and renewable energy.¹ India and Qatar elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2025 during the visit of Sheikh Tamim to India. India and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in January 2017, and an institutional mechanism of the UAE-India Strategic Dialogue has also been established. Oman is India's oldest strategic partner in the Gulf region, as both countries transformed their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2008. Besides, India is also engaging with the GCC as a collective in political and strategic dialogues. In September 2022, India and the GCC signed an MoU on Mechanisms of Consultation, which would institutionalise regular political consultations between both sides.

Both sides held the first Senior Officials meeting in March 2023 in Riyadh. A major milestone was achieved in September 2024 when India and GCC held their first Joint Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue in Riyadh, attended by the foreign ministers of all the GCC countries, GCC Secretary General and India's External Affairs Minister. The meeting adopted a Joint Action Plan 2024-2028 whereby both sides agreed to join hands on a number of areas, including, among others, trade, security, food security and energy.²

Bilateral Trade

For decades, economic relations have been the cornerstone of India-GCC ties. India views the Gulf region as its economic hinterland and has consistently worked to strengthen trade and business connections with these countries. The volume of bilateral trade between India and GCC countries has continued to grow. India's petroleum imports form a significant part of its trade from the region, while Indian manufactured goods have gained a substantial market in

the Gulf. As a result, the GCC has rapidly emerged as a major trading partner of India, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia ranking among India's top five trading partners in the world. Although the political relationship between India and the GCC has experienced several ups and downs, bilateral trade and commerce have steadily increased. This growth in trade has fostered greater interdependence and shared economic interests between India and the GCC countries. India is among the world's fastest-growing economies. The GCC countries, by dint of their petroleum and natural gas reserves, play a crucial role in the energy sector and the global economy. This complementarity significantly promotes bilateral trade. To expand their economic activities further, the GCC countries adopted the 'Look East policy', aimed at deepening economic ties with Asian powers, particularly India, China, Japan and South Korea. Their strategy to prioritise relations with Asian nations aligns well with India's approach of engaging with the GCC.

Even the aftermath of the Arab unrest and other regional tensions witnessed in the Gulf or West Asian region has not affected India's trade with the GCC countries. The table below shows that trade between India and the GCC countries has maintained its momentum over the past decade. The UAE and Saudi Arabia remain key trade partners for India, not just within the GCC, but globally as well. With other GCC countries, India's trade relationship has not suffered even during the peak of the Qatar crisis. Instead, India has signed numerous agreements and MoUs with individual GCC member states to further strengthen bilateral trade and commerce. India and the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in February 2022. Bilateral trade between the two countries has significantly increased as a result of the CEPA—from US\$43.3 billion in 2020–21 to over US\$ 100 billion in 2024–25. During the visit of Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim to India in February 2025 both the countries established a strategic partnership. Both sides agreed to further diversify bilateral trade and elevate the existing Joint Working Group on Trade and Commerce into a Joint Commission on Trade and Commerce, which will be headed by the Ministers of Commerce and Industry on both sides. India and Qatar are exploring the possibility of signing a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and intend to double bilateral trade by 2030.³ India and Oman are also discussing a bilateral Comprehensive Economic

Partnership Agreement to boost trade and investment relations, and have already held two rounds of negotiations.⁴ India is negotiating with the GCC to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Both sides agreed to discuss an FTA in 2004. Subsequently, two rounds of negotiations were held in 2006 and 2008, after which the talks were paused as the GCC deferred FTA negotiations with all the countries.⁵ In November 2022, both sides announced that they would resume the FTA negotiation.

Table 5.1: India's Bilateral Trade with the GCC Countries (values in US\$ million)

S. No.	Country	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
1.	Bahrain	762.40	987.94	1,281.77	980.6	1057.74	1,653.19	1,979.76	1,738	1,642
2.	Kuwait	5,960.27	8,531.34	8,764.74	10,860.36	6,268.34	12,243.68	13,807.82	10,466	10,221
3.	Oman	4,018.79	6,703.76	5,005.30	5,931.14	5,443.22	9,988.98	12,388.43	8,947	10,614
4.	Qatar	8,430.78	9,880.90	12,332.86	10,954.33	9,214.97	15,031.45	18,774.87	14,043	14,146
5.	Saudi Arabia	25,082.68	27,480.66	34,040.93	33,094.22	22,043.37	42,859.52	52,762.92	42,975	41,877
6.	UAE	52,685.33	49,885.23	59,912.05	59,110.1	43,302.53	72,878.36	84,840.45	83,651	100,059
7.	Total	96,940.25	103,469.83	121,337.65	120,930.8	87,330.17	154,655.18	184,554.25	161,820	178,559

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

Energy Ties

India is heavily dependent on energy imports from the GCC countries, as India's current oil reserves and production are not adequate to meet the fast-growing energy requirements of the country. Thus, energy has constantly remained a major component of India–GCC bilateral trade. India buys around 60 per cent of its total oil imports from the Gulf region. With a growing population, increasing industrialisation and India's target of achieving a five trillion dollar economy, India's demand for energy continues to increase every year. Currently, India is the third largest oil-consuming country in the world after the US and China. It is estimated that by 2030, India will be the top oil-consuming country in the world.⁶ The annual rate of growth of energy consumption in India is 4.5 per cent, which is much higher than of the global average of 1.4 per cent.⁷

As West Asia remains a volatile region, the chances of popular unrest,

terrorism or civil war affecting the production and supply of oil remain high. This is a matter of huge concern for India as the Gulf region is a key source of India's oil imports. Therefore, to meet the exigencies, India has established the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) to store crude oil in the underground rock caverns in Vishakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur to store five MMT of crude oil. India is also planning to establish another 6.5 MMT SPR storage facility at Chandikhol (4 MMT) in Odisha and Padur (2.5 MMT). In this regard, the role of the GCC countries in supplying crude oil for storage is crucial.

In 2017, the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd (ISPRL) signed an agreement with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) for storing crude oil in the Mangalore facility. As per the Agreement, ADNOC has also filled up crude oil in one of the two caverns at the Mangaluru facility at its own cost.⁸ In 2020, in order to further encourage ADNOC to store more oil in the SPR facilities, India allowed flexibility to ADNOC to export 50 per cent of the crude oil stored in the Mangalore facility.⁹ ISPRL also signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2019 regarding crude oil storage in the Padur facility in Karnataka.¹⁰

There is a strong complementarity between India and the GCC countries in the energy sector. While India is dependent on energy supplies from the Gulf to meet its growing requirements, for the GCC countries, India is a long-term assured market for their energy resource. Such complementarity drives the strategic partnership between India and the GCC countries in the energy sector. India has signed comprehensive strategic partnership agreements in the energy sector with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two important energy suppliers and trading partners of India. Moving beyond the import and export of energy, India intends to engage with the countries of the region in further developing infrastructure, undertaking joint ventures and joining hands together in technology and investment in the energy sector.¹¹ In recent years, India has been engaging deeply with the GCC countries in the energy sector, moving beyond the buyer–seller relationship. For instance, India is partnering with Saudi ARAMCO and ADNOC of the UAE for building a refinery in Maharashtra. For the first time, in 2018, a consortium of Indian companies made investments and is involved in upstream activities in the UAE.¹²

Table 5.2: India's Crude Oil Imports (values in US\$ million)

S. No.	Country	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
1.	Saudi Arabia	15,262.60	21,381.04	20,355.22	10,753.16	19,706.37	29,077.41	21,707	20,095
2.	UAE	6,122.20	9,512.48	10,927.52	7,360.73	10,700.71	16,840.67	8,958	13,862
3.	Kuwait	5,283.96	5,430.90	4,840.35	3,126.93	6,551.90	8,024.61	1,893	4,019
4.	Oman	2,413.73	805.61	1,010.43	1,156.36	3,096.58	2,657.57	431	1,148
5.	Qatar	1,264.98	1,215.74	1,365.52	955.73	935.69	1,874.62	1,118	1,063

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

Like petroleum, India's demand for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is also rising each year. Currently, India ranks as the fourth largest importer of LNG in the world after China, Japan and South Korea. As India aims to adopt cleaner fuels, its demand for natural gas is expected to grow. The country plans to increase the share of LNG in its energy mix to about 15 per cent from the current 6.7 per cent, and it is taking various steps in this regard, including the establishment of LNG facilities and terminals.¹³ The GCC countries also play a key role in helping India adopt cleaner and greener fuels in the future. Qatar is the top source of LNG for India in the world. In the fiscal year 2024–25, India imported LNG from Qatar amounting to US\$6.392 billion. The UAE and Oman are two other important LNG suppliers to India contributing US\$2.044 billion and US\$1.049 billion, respectively.¹⁴ This reflects the significance of the GCC countries for India's energy security. In February 2024, Qatar Energy and Petronet LNG Limited signed an agreement under which Qatar will supply 7.5 million metric tonnes of LNG per annum to India for 20 years starting from 2028.¹⁵ At present, there are no international gas pipelines passing through India; thus, all natural gas imports are transported via LNG tankers.

Defence and Security Cooperation

The emergence of unrest in the Arab world that led to a significant rise in the incidents of terrorism and extremism. The rise in the number of terrorist organisations brought new challenges to the security and stability in the region. As it has been already discussed in the previous chapters, in the aftermath of the Arab unrest, there was an increase in terrorist activities, particularly by the

Al Qaeda and ISIS, and a number of new terrorist organisations emerged, taking advantage of the instability and weakening of central authorities in some of the countries in West Asia and North Africa.

In the last decade, defence and security cooperation between India and the GCC countries has markedly improved. Significant progress has been achieved in the security sector and continues to grow every year. Cooperation in defence has been gradual, but there is a rising consensus between India and the GCC countries on the importance of establishing strong defence partnerships that would benefit both sides. India's engagements with the GCC countries on defence and security aim for long-term security and strategic goals, considering India's interests and stakes in the region. This also reflects the advantages of collaborating with GCC countries to promote regional stability. India's stakes and interests in the Gulf region are rapidly increasing across multiple areas, such as bilateral trade, energy, diaspora and strategic concerns. Any threat to the Gulf's regional security is likely to impact India's interests. Therefore, India and the GCC countries share a common interest in working together to address these challenges.

For both India and GCC countries, piracy continues to be a major security challenge in the Western Indian Ocean. In the past, India and the GCC countries have been victims of piracy attacks in the Western Indian Ocean, particularly off the Somali coast. Piracy disrupts international trade and commerce and poses a severe threat to the safety of the SLOCs, thereby affecting the national economy of these countries. Mutual threat perception over the issue of piracy has driven India and the GCC countries to join hands to fight piracy in the Indian Ocean. India has continuously deployed a naval ship in the Gulf of Aden to counter the threat of piracy in the area. It has been successful in combating piracy and providing safe passage to a number of ships from different countries.

The UAE has emerged as a key security partner for India in the region. Cooperation on key security issues such as terrorism, extremism, financial crimes, arms and drug smuggling and piracy, has strengthened in recent years. Several terrorists, including ISIS sympathisers, have been deported by the UAE to India to face judicial proceedings for their crimes.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia has also collaborated with India in combating terrorism and has deported multiple terrorists to India, including members of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT).¹⁷

Cooperation between the militaries of India and the GCC countries is strengthening. Such collaboration has grown in recent years. The Indian Navy is at the forefront of working with its GCC counterparts, engaging in joint naval exercises, port calls and training. The important role played by the navy in promoting India's interests is known as 'naval diplomacy'. According to India's Maritime Doctrine 2009, naval diplomacy aims to support the country's foreign policy goals by building 'bridges of friendship' and enhancing international relations cooperation.¹⁸ In this regard, the Indian Navy has been successful in building friendly ties with the GCC navies.

Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has also been reaching out and engaging with its counterparts in the GCC countries. It has signed an MoU with its Omani counterpart, the Royal Oman Police (Coast Guard), for the 'establishment of a collaborative relationship to combat transnational illegal activities at sea and develop regional cooperation' between the two.¹⁹ In 2018, ICG conducted the Search and Rescue Communication Exercise (SARCOMEX) with Oman and Qatar. In December 2018, ICG ship Vikram went on a goodwill visit to the UAE and conducted joint training exercises with the UAE Coast Guard.²⁰ In January–February 2020, ICG ship Samudra Paheredar was deployed to Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Indian Army conducts joint exercise 'Al Nagah' with Oman for increasing interoperability, countering terrorist operations and countering insurgency, among others.²¹

Indian Air Force (IAF) has also been engaging with their GCC counterparts. IAF and the Royal Air Force of Oman have been regularly engaging in joint air exercises known as Exercise Eastern Bridge. The sixth edition of the joint exercise was held in Jodhpur in February 2022. IAF has also engaged with the UAE Air Force in the joint exercise called 'Exercise Desert Eagle'. IAF participated in the joint air exercise Desert Flag VI, which was hosted by the UAE in March 2021 at the Al Dhafra Airbase.²² The military-to-military involvement between India and the GCC countries has been limited to joint exercises, training and sharing of each other's expertise and techniques. There is a large scope for further engagement between the two in this regard. A number of military officers from the GCC countries have undergone training courses in different military institutes in India.

Indian Expatriates in GCC

The Gulf region is one of the most attractive destinations for Indian workers, both skilled and semi-skilled. Over nine million Indian expatriate workers in the GCC countries serve as a natural link between the two. Indian expatriate workers are known to be hardworking, sincere, efficient, low-paid and law-abiding,²³ and they constitute the largest expatriate workforce in the region. Although migration between India and the Gulf region has continued steadily due to historical ties, the economic boom in the Gulf, following the oil price increase in 1973, further accelerated the migration of Indians seeking employment opportunities in the region. In the post-oil boom period, demand for both skilled and unskilled workers grew substantially. As the local population was unable to fulfil the requirements of the oil industry, the flow of labour from India increased considerably. With ongoing industrialisation in the Gulf and rising demand for expatriate labour, the trend of Indian migration from India to the Gulf region has continued to increase. In 1975, the number of Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf countries reached 257,655²⁴ – which has now reached over nine million – indicating the rapid pace at which the number of Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf region has increased in the last few decades. Among all the GCC countries, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are the two most favourite destinations for Indian workers, as these countries are home to the largest number of expatriates. The table below also shows the country-wise distribution of Indian workers in the GCC countries.

Table 5.3: Number of Indians in the GCC Countries

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>No. of Indians</i>
1.	Saudi Arabia	25,94,947
2.	UAE	34,25,144
3.	Kuwait	10,29,861
4.	Qatar	7,46,550
5.	Oman	7,81,141
6.	Bahrain	3,26,658
7.	Total	89,04,310

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

While many Indians find employment in the region and the Indian Government benefits through substantial remittances, the GCC countries have

also gained significantly from such migration. Due to their small populations and skilled workforces, the GCC nations needed expatriate workers to support their economies. As a result, migrant workers have played a crucial role in the economic development and progress of these countries. As their economies expanded, their reliance on skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour grew steadily. This has led to an increasing number of Indian migrant workers in the region. The leaders of these countries have acknowledged and appreciated the contribution of Indians to their national growth story.

There have been several instances of violence against Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf. The Indian Government has taken up such cases with the local authorities and has been assured of all possible legal support and an appropriate work environment. In order to provide help and support to the expatriate workers and prevent their exploitation, India has established a number of institutional frameworks and has signed MoUs on labour and workforce management with these countries.

A large number of Indian expatriates leave their families back home, and thus, they regularly remit money to them. Foreign remittances received by India constitute a very large chunk of India's foreign exchange. In 2021, India received total foreign remittances of US\$87 billion,²⁵ and it is estimated that more than half of the total remittances to India come from the Gulf countries, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia being the top two sources.

Facing COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges

Like elsewhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the industrial and economic activities in the Gulf. This resulted in the loss of employment of a number of Indian workers. Many became desperate to return home after losing their jobs during the pandemic. The pandemic revealed that a section of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf remains highly vulnerable to rapid and unexpected changes caused by such crises. A large number of them were stranded in labour camps that were poorly maintained, unhygienic, and overcrowded. Most of these workers were unskilled or semi-skilled and employed in the private sector across the region.

To contain the further spread of the virus, the GCC countries adopted several precautionary measures, including shutting down government and

private sector offices, educational institutions, declaring curfews and lockdowns, and suspending commercial flight operations. Feeling helpless in a foreign country during the pandemic, many sought help to return home. In such a challenging situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached out to the Gulf leaders and appealed to them to ensure the well-being of the Indian community there; and in response, he received assurances from them that the Indian community would be cared for during the pandemic. For the government of India, the loss of employment among many of its nationals in the Gulf was yet another cause for concern. Therefore, it continuously engaged with the GCC countries to ensure the livelihood, welfare, and wages of workers.

In April 2020, India started the registration process for its overseas nationals who wanted to return home amid the pandemic. As a result, many of them in various Gulf countries registered to travel back. In May 2020, India launched the Vande Bharat Mission to repatriate its stranded nationals in different parts of the world. India reached out to all Gulf countries to establish air bubbles and relax travel and health restrictions. All these countries responded positively to the Government's efforts. The mission proved to be successful, and it emerged as one of the largest peacetime repatriation missions ever undertaken in the world. According to the Government of India, over 700,000 Indians returned from the Gulf during the pandemic under the Vande Bharat Mission.²⁶ An estimated 330,058 Indian nationals from the UAE, 137,900 from Saudi Arabia, 97,802 from Kuwait, 72,259 from Oman, 51,190 from Qatar, and 27,453 from Bahrain came home as part of the mission.²⁷

There were mixed responses from the GCC states towards the plight of the Indian expatriates during the pandemic. While some reports suggested that the migrant workers became helpless and suffered a lot in the absence of any substantial support from their employers or local government agencies, other reports indicated that the support provided by the local government agencies included assurances of financial assistance, medical facilities and hygienic living conditions. As reports of migrant workers in distress in these countries emerged, there were calls from several quarters, including governments and humanitarian organisations, urging the authorities in the Gulf to provide support to the very people who had helped to build their country and economy. During the pandemic, Kuwait offered amnesty to people

who had overstayed their visas. As the football World Cup was scheduled to be held in Qatar in 2022, many workers were involved in various projects. The Qatari Government issued directives to ensure hygienic living conditions for the workers, as well as their wages and medical care. Similar announcements were also made by the Bahraini Government.

Cooperation between India and the GCC countries deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, India supported the GCC nations by supplying hydroxychloroquine tablets. India also dispatched a 15-member medical team to Kuwait at the request of the Kuwaiti Government,²⁸ along with another team of 88 medical and healthcare professionals to the UAE to assist in the pandemic response.²⁹ By swiftly providing medical aid and expertise, India strengthened its image as a strong and reliable partner standing alongside in times of crisis.

When the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic struck India hard in 2021, all the GCC countries stepped forward to help India by supplying oxygen and other medical equipment.³⁰ India also supplied vaccines to all the GCC states. Cooperation in the health sector has become a key area of collaboration between India and the GCC nations during the pandemic. These countries all recognised that mutual cooperation and support are essential to combat the pandemic. India's ongoing support to the Gulf States in providing food, medicines, medical equipment and medical professionals during the COVID-19 crisis has significantly influenced their leadership, which is a major reason behind the support India has received from them regarding the migrants' issue.

India's Non-interventionist Approach

India and the GCC have developed a strong partnership in a number of areas. India looks up to the GCC as a strong, stable and effective regional organisation in West Asia. At a time when most of the countries in the region have been affected by the Arab unrest, the GCC as a regional organisation remained a symbol of unity and stability in the turbulent region. India, therefore, supports a stable GCC playing a constructive and positive role in regional politics, security, economy and energy issues. In the aftermath of the Qatar crisis in 2017, India appealed for dialogue and negotiation among all the member

states to resolve the differences according to international law and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.³¹ Continuing with its non-interventionist policy, India stated that the crisis is ‘an internal matter of GCC’.³² India believed that it would not face any challenge arising out of the crisis, but was concerned about the chances of any Indian nationals getting stuck in these countries as a result of the announcement of the boycott. The GCC countries agreed to restore their unity at the Al Ula Summit in January 2021. They signed the Al Ula declaration and agreed to reconcile their differences. India welcomed the reconciliation and rapprochement between the GCC countries.³³ India believes that the GCC, as a regional organisation, has an important role to play in maintaining the security and stability in the Gulf region.

The relationship between India and the GCC has continued to make significant progress despite the regional turmoil in West Asia and North Africa. India adopted a non-intervening approach to the rapidly evolving political developments that unfolded in the region. While India urged for peace and stability on the streets, it also appealed to the rulers to accommodate the demands and interests of the protesting youth. Similarly, India refrained from intervening in the issues of regional security and competition among local actors. Instead, India provided financial aid and assistance to support people in the wake of the humanitarian crisis. Additionally, India made serious efforts to repatriate its nationals as the situation worsened in many countries across the region. This understanding and approach of India towards the regional crisis in West Asia and North Africa were appreciated by the Arab Gulf rulers.

The Gulf countries have reciprocated India’s efforts to engage with them during the unrest. Like other countries, India adopted the wait-and-watch approach to the evolving situation as the protests started against the rulers in December 2010. The GCC countries appreciated the policy of non-interference of India in the internal and regional affairs of the Gulf region. As the protests spread quickly from one country to another, countries were unsure about the possible outcomes of the popular resentment. While India urged the leaders facing protests to ‘understand the winds of change’ and the demands of the people, it did not express its direct or indirect support for the protesters in the streets. Such an approach was very highly appreciated by the GCC rulers,

although India constantly faced criticism for adopting a very passive foreign policy approach towards the Gulf region, where India has such huge stakes and interests involved.

Furthermore, in the initial weeks following the protests, India's main objective was to protect India's national interest and evacuate the Indian nationals stuck in those countries. To that objective, India sought help from all the countries concerned. India's balanced approach towards the issue helped it evacuate thousands of its nationals and maintain the momentum of engagement. Among the GCC countries, only Bahrain and Oman witnessed significant protests by the people. India issued advisories to its nationals living in the region not to take part in the protests or any political activity. It also advised its nationals to refrain from any activities that may lead to further deterioration of the situation.

The Gulf countries appreciate India's decision not to involve itself in the domestic and regional turmoil in the Gulf. The Gulf Arab regimes also prefer no external interference in their domestic affairs within broader Arab politics. Therefore, India was seen as a friend concerned about regional developments and willing to support them if needed, while remaining politically non-interfering. India was concerned when Arab protests reached Bahrain and Oman, as it is in the Gulf region that India's crucial strategic, economic, energy and security interests are located. The Arab unrest impacted high-level exchanges between India and the GCC countries. However, it was business as usual, with trade, commerce and energy supplies continuing without interruption.

Exploring New Frontiers

India's engagement with the region is gradually moving beyond the bilateral collective engagements, as both are exploring new frontiers of engagement on the issue of common interest. India and the GCC countries are engaging in multilateral forums on issues of common interest. Connectivity has emerged as one of the most prominent issues of collaboration between India and the Gulf countries.

In September 2023, during the G20 leadership summit in Delhi, a MoU was signed by India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, France, Germany, Italy, the US and the EU to establish the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor

(IMEC).³⁴ This initiative was intended to create a multimodal regional connectivity corridor, which will connect India to the Gulf and then to Europe through an integrated maritime, rail and road infrastructure. The signatory countries believe that this corridor will lead to further economic development, including cooperation on trade, investment, renewable energy and scientific and technological cooperation, while promoting sustainable development and strengthening global supply chains.

In the run-up to the G20 summit held in India in 2023 under the theme *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (One Earth—One Family—One Future), India invited two GCC countries – Oman and the UAE – as guest countries to participate in the meetings. Ministers from Oman³⁵ and the UAE³⁶ visited India and participated in different meetings of the G20. The participation of Oman and the UAE in the G20 meetings reflects the growing alignment in perspectives and the convergence of interests between India and the GCC countries, particularly within the broader context of the Global South. This shared outlook on key global challenges has created new avenues for enhanced bilateral and multilateral engagements.³⁷ Climate change, tourism, digital economy, global supply chains, etc., are some of the emerging issues over which India and GCC countries have a shared interest in future.

Earlier, India–Israel–UAE–USA (I2U2) minilateral grouping has also made significant progress in cooperation in several fields, including agriculture, food security, energy security, climate change, science and technology. There have been a number of initiatives taken in this regard by these countries. In July 2022, the first Leaders’ meeting of the I2U2 agreed to establish a hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat, including wind, solar and battery storage systems. This is intended to contribute to the sustainable energy and climate goals of the member states. The UAE would play a pivotal role as a key knowledge and investment partner in this project.³⁸ In both these cases, India has engaged with the countries from the Gulf region along with the external powers such as the United States and Europe. This shows India’s interest in engaging with the countries of the region in multiple new areas of cooperation, along with the developed countries, which will provide the benefits of technological know-how and economic progress.

Conclusion

India has significantly deepened its engagement with the Gulf region. There has been an increase in the bilateral exchange of visits at the highest level as well as ministerial and officer levels, which indicates growing engagement over various issues. A key feature of India's approach has been the ability to maintain balanced relations with diverse actors, including Iran, the GCC member states and Israel, despite the geopolitical rivalries among them. Also, India has extended its support to conflict-affected countries, such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya, emphasising a commitment to regional stability. India's ability to engage constructively with all sides, regardless of intra-regional disputes, has contributed to its image as a neutral and non-interventionist partner. This perception has proven beneficial, particularly during periods of regional crisis, such as the Qatar diplomatic rift of 2017 and the earlier dispute in 2014, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain temporarily withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. In both instances, India refrained from taking sides, adopting a policy that prioritises national interest and aims to preserve and strengthen its ties with all GCC states. This balanced and pragmatic approach reflects India's broader strategic objective of sustaining long-term engagement with the Gulf region while avoiding entanglement in its internal disputes.

Despite regional turbulences, India's bilateral trade and commerce with the Arab Gulf countries have continued to grow. The Gulf countries, which are a major source of India's energy supply, continue to supply oil to India. Additionally, India has built a strategic partnership with some Gulf nations in the energy sector, moving beyond the traditional buyer–seller relationship. They have explored opportunities for joint ventures and long-term investments in energy. Defence and security cooperation has significantly increased between India and the GCC countries. In the decades immediately following India's independence, cooperation in defence and security did not receive much attention for political reasons. However, with the changing geopolitical situation in the region, rising security challenges, and the shared threat perception of India and GCC countries towards terrorism, extremism, piracy and criminal activities, there has been a substantial increase in defence and security cooperation between India and the GCC.

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6

GCC and the Extra-regional Powers

External powers have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the political and security landscape of the Gulf region. During the colonial period, British influence was predominant, with the United Kingdom exercising significant control over the political affairs of the Gulf states. Following the British withdrawal in 1968, the United States assumed the role of the primary external actor, a position it continues to maintain. The United States has established robust political and security partnerships with all the GCC member states, underpinned by the deployment of American military forces across the region. This military presence serves as a security umbrella against external threats and underscores the strategic importance the US attributes to the Gulf.

In contrast, Russia has historically had a limited geopolitical footprint in the Gulf. However, in recent years, Moscow has intensified its diplomatic and strategic engagement with the GCC states, particularly in the domains of defence, energy and economic cooperation. Russia has sought to expand its influence by supplying arms to certain Gulf states, although its arms exports remain significantly lower than those of the United States. Additionally, Russia's growing ties with the neighbouring countries such as Iran, Iraq and Syria under Bashar Al Assad indicate its broader ambitions in the Gulf.

China, for its part, has markedly expanded its presence in the region over the past two decades. While Beijing emphasises economic and energy cooperation as the cornerstone of its Gulf engagement, the deepening of China–GCC relations carries important geopolitical implications as well. Over time,

China's increasing involvement is likely to reshape the regional strategic environment.

The active involvement of these external powers – each pursuing distinct interests – has contributed to the complexity of Gulf regional politics and security. The frequent occurrence of conflicts in the region has created tensions that have drawn the external powers to the region. In the current geopolitical context, the roles of the United States, Russia and China remain central to the evolving dynamics of the Gulf and are likely to influence the trajectory of regional developments in the foreseeable future.

United States and GCC

GCC and the American Security Umbrella

The United States remains the most influential external actor in ensuring peace and stability in the Gulf region. Both at the individual state level and through the collective framework of the GCC, the Gulf Arab states maintain deep and sustained engagement with the United States on matters of regional security. The United States has established a widespread military presence across all GCC member states and provides a security umbrella to the Gulf states. Although the Gulf countries have developed varying degrees of military cooperation with other external powers, the scope, depth and strategic alignment of their defence relations with the United States are unmatched. These ties encompass not only defence but also longstanding economic and strategic partnerships. Consequently, any shift – real or perceived – in the American policy or engagement carries significant implications for the security architecture and political equilibrium of the region.¹ Thus, any rift among the GCC member states is also a challenge for the US foreign policy that potentially hampers regional stability.

Despite the longstanding economic, political and security cooperation between the United States and the GCC states, the relationship has encountered several challenges over time. Notably, during the presidency of Barack Obama, tensions emerged as a number of Gulf countries expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of US policy in the region. The Obama Administration's strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific – commonly referred to as the 'Pivot to Asia' – was perceived by several GCC members as a sign of declining American

commitment to Gulf security. This perceived reorientation raised concerns among Gulf leaders regarding the reliability of the US as a long-term security partner and contributed to a sense of strategic uncertainty in the region.² The beginning of the Arab unrest in December 2010 kept the US engaged in the region as the uprisings challenged the status quo in the West Asian and North African region. As the protests continued to spread, the United States found it necessary to recalibrate its approach to maintain influence and manage instability. Given the depth of its longstanding political, economic and security relations with the GCC states, it remains in Washington's strategic interest to reinforce ties with these key regional actors during the turmoil. Furthermore, the US policy responses to major conflict zones – such as Yemen, Syria, Libya and the enduring Israeli–Palestinian conflict – necessitated close coordination with the GCC states, whose political support and regional leverage are essential to the pursuit of American objectives in the region.

The US, GCC and the Iranian Nuclear Issue

The Iranian nuclear issue is a common concern for both the US and the GCC. As mentioned earlier, GCC perceives the Iranian nuclear programme as an existential threat. The GCC countries have been dealing with different US administrations in order to find a solution to the Iranian nuclear controversy. Notwithstanding the concerns of the GCC countries, President Barack Obama moved ahead to sign the Iranian nuclear deal known as the JCPOA in 2015. It was alleged by some of the GCC countries that Iran is misusing the lifting of economic sanctions and is involved in a number of conflicts in the region. Thus, the withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran by President Trump were welcomed by these countries. As the Iranian nuclear stalemate continued, President Joe Biden, after assuming power, declared to re-join the JCPOA, provided Iran agrees to abide by all the agreement in letter and spirit. Iranian nuclear talks with all the stakeholders have taken place in several rounds in Vienna, though no significant progress was achieved. The Vienna talks were discontinued as a result of the Russia–Ukraine War. President Donald Trump, after making a comeback for the second term, revived the talks with the mediation of Oman. However, the talks were discontinued as a result of the Iran–Israel 12-Day War, which drew the US into the war as it bombed the Iranian nuclear sites.

The US–GCC alignment on the Iranian nuclear issue constitutes a critical component of efforts to ensure peace and stability in the Gulf region. While the United States has made concerted efforts to keep the GCC states closely informed and aligned on developments related to Iran’s nuclear programme, the Gulf states continue to expect unwavering support from Washington in addressing what they perceive as a major regional threat. Nevertheless, divergences persist between the United States and individual GCC members on a range of other regional issues. Despite these points of contention, sustained US–GCC cooperation remains essential for managing regional tensions and preserving the security architecture of the Gulf.

Besides, in the aftermath of the withdrawal from the JCPOA, President Trump adopted a ‘maximum pressure’ policy towards Iran. Trump announced sweeping unilateral sanctions against Iran to further cripple its economy and thus force it to renegotiate the nuclear issue to have a deal. As a result of the American sanctions, a number of countries, including India, had to stop buying oil from Iran. Several financial institutions, entities and individuals related to Iran were also sanctioned.³ The ‘maximum pressure’ policy also intended to expand the nuclear talks to cover the issue of missiles and Iran’s support for terrorist elements in the region as well.⁴ There were increasing diplomatic pressures put on Iran by several European countries to compel the country to come to the negotiating table.

The GCC supported Trump’s maximum pressure policy towards Iran. After the Vienna talks, the GCC demanded that they be a party to the negotiations on the revival of the nuclear deal as the issue directly affects their national and regional security.⁵ The GCC also stresses that the Iranian support for terrorism, armed militias and its missile programme should also be discussed in future negotiations, along with the talks on the nuclear issue. They also argue that despite having huge security implications for them, they were neglected and sidelined during the negotiations leading to the signing of the JCPOA, and they were reduced to a mere bystander.⁶ There was a convergence of thinking between the US and the GCC states on the Iranian nuclear issue as Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. As Biden started the Vienna talks, there were concerns among the GCC countries over the regional security implications of restoring the nuclear deal. There is a huge concern in the GCC that Iran

will take advantage of the lifting of sanctions and the economic relief it will get after the JCPOA is restored, which will further embolden and facilitate Iran's disruptive behaviour activities in the region.

The US, Arab Uprisings and the GCC

As the Arab unrest continued to aggravate, the Gulf sheikhdoms became deeply concerned about their regime security as well as regional security in the Gulf. As the US is their principal security provider, they were concerned about any major shift in American foreign policy towards the region amid the uprisings.⁷ At a time of unprecedented political turmoil, the Gulf countries wanted the support of the US more than ever before. The US, on the other hand, was cautiously watching the rapid developments taking place in West Asia and North Africa and initially adopted a restrained approach to the fast-paced developments. As the dust of the popular uprisings started to gradually settle down, the US and the GCC found convergences in their approach to the regional turbulence.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, the United States and the GCC states initially found a convergence of strategic interests. Both sought the removal of President Bashar Al Assad and the establishment of an alternative political order in Damascus. To this end, the Gulf Arab countries extended substantial political and financial support to opposition groups, backing the Syrian opposition coalition in its efforts to challenge the Assad regime. The United States, likewise, was actively involved in Syria, providing various forms of assistance. In addition to humanitarian aid, Washington offered 'non-lethal assistance' to selected units of the Free Syrian Army and the Free Syrian Police to fight against the terrorists.⁸ Besides, the US has been a key player in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and has played a decisive role in the fight against ISIS in Syria. The US and the GCC have supported Kofi Annan's six-point formula for bringing peace and stability to Syria. They have also supported a greater role for the UN in resolving the Syrian conflict.

But subsequently, differences emerged between some members of the GCC and the US over Syria. Having realised that Assad cannot be removed even militarily, the UAE, Oman and Bahrain decided to restore diplomatic ties with Syria. They argued that normalising the relationship with Syria would

strengthen intra-Arab relations. The UAE's Foreign Minister visited Syria and met with Assad in 2021. This caused friction between the US and the UAE as the former believed that such action would only give international recognition to the oppressive Assad regime. The US also stated that it will not normalise relations with Syria, which was suspended in 2012 as it argued that Assad has not gained any substantial legitimacy.⁹ The US pressed for a political process in Syria, including all the Syrians, to bring stability to the country. But despite the differences, the US and GCC countries continued to work together in supporting Syria in fighting terrorism and providing humanitarian assistance to the people.

In Yemen, the US supported the GCC Initiative that led to a smooth transfer of power from President Ali Abdullah Saleh to Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The US also supported the National Dialogue Conference, which was held in Yemen and involved all the major political parties and other stakeholders to formulate a future road map for the country. The Houthis' capture of the capital Sanaa changed the political and security situation in Yemen. The US supported the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen to push the Houthis back to the Sada province after Hadi appealed for help at the UN. The US and the GCC, along with several other countries, have alleged that Iran provides political, financial and military support to the Houthis.¹⁰ The Iran factor in Yemen has drawn both the US and GCC together to fight against the Houthis.

Besides, cooperation between the US and the GCC in countering terrorism in Yemen has also been a major component of their relationship. The strong presence of AQAP has been a major security challenge for the US as well as the GCC. Saudi Arabia, in the past, has provided millions of dollars of aid to the Ali Abdullah Saleh government to fight against Al Qaeda in Yemen. Despite all its efforts, it was not successful in containing the Al Qaeda threat. At present, Al Qaeda continues to occupy large territories in the south and exploits the prolonged political instability in the country. The US has been targeting Al Qaeda in Yemen by using UAVs. Notably, Qassim Al Rimi, the emir of AQAP, was killed in a US military operation in Yemen in 2020.¹¹

The Saudi-led military coalition initially operated with considerable autonomy in its campaign against the Houthi movement in Yemen. However,

under the Biden administration, a shift in US policy introduced new constraints on Saudi Arabia's military operations. Washington resumed negotiations on the Iranian nuclear agreement through the Vienna talks and, in parallel, imposed restrictions on arms transfers to Saudi Arabia, including a halt in the supply of offensive weaponry. These measures reflected a recalibrated US approach that prioritised diplomacy with Iran and sought an end to the conflict in Yemen as a prerequisite for progress on the nuclear file. This divergence in strategic priorities led to tensions between the United States and Saudi Arabia. While the United States viewed a cessation of hostilities in Yemen as essential to fostering a conducive environment for nuclear negotiations with Iran, Saudi Arabia – and to a similar extent, the UAE – considered the Houthi threat as a direct challenge to their national security. For Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the conflict in Yemen is a matter of vital national interest, not easily subject to external compromise or diplomatic trade-offs.

The US and the Qatar Crisis

The US has played a key role in bringing all the countries together, as it was in the interest of the US. A divided GCC does not favour the American objectives of isolating Iran in the region. The US could perceive that if the GCC crisis lingers, it could have implications for the US military interests in the region, as Qatar hosts around 11,000 American troops in the Al Udeid Air Base in Doha. The US was also concerned that Iran and Russia could take the opportunity and strengthen their positions in the region.

In the immediate aftermath of the Qatar crisis in 2017, President Donald Trump accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and expressed support for the position of the boycotting states – namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. This initial response marked a departure from the traditionally balanced US approach toward intra-GCC disputes, particularly given Washington's longstanding and strategically important relationship with both Qatar and the other GCC member states. However, this stance was soon followed by a policy recalibration. Recognising the potential destabilising effects of the intra-GCC rift on regional security and US interests, the Trump administration shifted toward a more conciliatory role. President Trump subsequently urged all parties, including Egypt, to resolve the dispute through

‘constructive negotiations’,¹² and the United States assumed a mediating role aimed at restoring unity within the GCC framework.

In February 2022, President Joe Biden designated Qatar as a major non-NATO ally, underscoring the strategic importance of US–Qatar relations. The United States played a central role in encouraging reconciliation among the GCC member states, recognising that regional unity was essential to advancing its broader strategic objectives. Moreover, the prolonged intra-Gulf crisis posed potential risks to US military interests, particularly given Qatar’s hosting of approximately 11,000 American troops at Al Udeid Air Base, a critical hub for its military operations in the region. Washington was also concerned that the continued estrangement among GCC states could create openings for rival powers, notably Iran and Russia, to deepen their engagement in the region and thereby challenge its influence.

Russia and the GCC

Russia’s relationship with the Gulf Arab states remains relatively limited in depth and scope when compared to their longstanding and multifaceted ties with the United States. Nevertheless, over the past two decades, Russia has gradually expanded its engagement with the GCC countries, particularly in the areas of energy cooperation and military collaboration. In navigating the complex security architecture of the Gulf region, Moscow has sought to position itself as a neutral actor. Given the divergent positions often adopted by Iran and the GCC states on key regional issues, Russia has pursued a strategy of diplomatic balance, maintaining relations with both sides while refraining from direct involvement in regional rivalries. This approach of Russia was evident during the 2017 Qatar crisis. Russia refrained from taking sides in the intra-GCC dispute. Instead, it expressed concern over the diplomatic rift and emphasised the need for a negotiated resolution. Moscow underscored that GCC unity was essential for maintaining regional stability and effectively combating terrorism.¹³ Russia is strengthening its engagement with the individual countries of the GCC. A number of important bilateral high-level visits have taken place between the two sides, which point towards a changing GCC–Russia relationship.

Russia and Regional Security in the Gulf

In July 2019, Russia proposed a concept of collective security in the Persian Gulf to the UN Secretary General. Russia argued that the security in the Gulf region has deteriorated because of the political and security upheavals in West Asia and North Africa. As the Gulf region has the largest concentration of hydrocarbons, the conflict in the region has the potential to affect the global economy. Further, the threat of multinational terrorist networks has also increased in the Gulf region. Therefore, Russia proposes to establish an 'Organisation for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf', involving all the regional countries and extra-regional powers having substantial stakes in the Gulf region, such as Russia, China, the US, the EU and India.¹⁴

This proposal was disavowed by the US as it wants to play the most dominant role in the Gulf without any external intervention from other powers. Russia is aware of the fact that the US is the most influential player in regional security in the Persian Gulf region, and all the GCC countries are long-standing allies of the US. Despite this, Russia proposes its view of collective security in the Gulf region, which is an indication of Russia's intention of playing a key role in the security of the region as an external player.¹⁵

The Gulf region has remained an important area in Russia's broader strategic calculations, even though Moscow's direct contribution to Gulf regional security has been limited. This is largely due to Russia's prioritisation of military engagements in other areas, particularly in Syria. Nonetheless, Russia's sustained diplomatic and economic outreach to the GCC states underscores its aspiration to expand its influence and assume a more active role in the region. It has positioned itself as a credible and neutral player capable of engaging with all the regional countries to find a way to restore regional peace and stability. By presenting itself as a neutral and credible interlocutor, Russia seeks to engage with all regional actors – both GCC states and Iran. Russia's growing presence has the potential to alter the regional balance of power, particularly if it succeeds in positioning itself as an alternative partner in security, energy and regional security affairs in the Gulf.

Russia, GCC and the Iranian Nuclear Issue

The Iranian nuclear issue remains one of the most sensitive and contentious concerns for the GCC states and a key point of divergence in their relations with Russia. The GCC countries view the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran as a direct threat to regional security and stability. Given the alignment of their strategic interests with those of the United States on this issue, the GCC states have relied heavily on Washington to lead international efforts in countering Iran's nuclear programme. Conversely, for Iran, Russia is regarded as a vital strategic partner, and their cooperation on nuclear matters constitutes a central pillar of their bilateral relationship. Russia's support for Iran's nuclear programme – including its role in developing key infrastructure such as the Bushehr nuclear power plant – has been instrumental in advancing Iran's nuclear capabilities, further complicating regional dynamics and limiting the scope for closer Russia–GCC cooperation.

Russia has vetoed the proposals to impose punitive sanctions on Iran in the UNSC. Russia was a part of the P5+1 negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal that was signed in 2015. Russia condemned the US withdrawal from the JCPOA as 'trampling on the norms of international law'.¹⁶ This ran contrary to the position taken by the GCC, which welcomed the decision of the Trump administration.¹⁷ Russia was an active participant in the Vienna talks to restore the JCPOA. In the middle of the Vienna talks in March 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sought assurance from the US that the revival of the JCPOA would not affect Russia's relationship with Iran.¹⁸ Russia and Iran signed a contract to build two new nuclear power plants in Bushehr to be completed by 2026.¹⁹ Although there have often been complaints from Iran about delays in completing the projects by Russia, the cooperation continues as it has been beneficial for both countries. However, Russia's support for Iran's nuclear programme has remained a significant source of tension and a key obstacle to deepening its relations with the GCC states. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Moscow in January 2022. During the visit, Raisi stated that Iran wants a relationship with Russia which is 'not temporary, but permanent and strategic'.²⁰

Russia–GCC Energy and Economic Cooperation

Russia is a key player in the global energy market as it is the world's second-largest oil exporter and the biggest exporter of natural gas. Russia is not a member of the OPEC, but it has been working closely with OPEC since the formation of OPEC Plus in 2016.²¹

Cooperation with the Gulf Arab states has yielded significant strategic and economic benefits for Russia. Historically, Moscow showed limited interest in collaborating with the OPEC on matters related to oil production levels and market stabilisation. Despite this, Russia passively benefited from OPEC's efforts to regulate global oil supply and support price stability. However, in light of the sharp decline in global oil prices and shifting dynamics in the international energy market, both Russia and OPEC recognised the mutual advantages of coordinated action. This convergence of interests culminated in the formation of the OPEC Plus framework in 2016, which brought together OPEC members and non-OPEC producers, including Russia. The alliance aimed to manage oil production, assign production quotas and collectively stabilise global oil prices. This arrangement proved advantageous for both Russia and the oil-producing states of the Gulf, particularly in terms of revenue generation and market predictability. Consequently, the OPEC Plus cooperation has fostered a growing rapprochement between Russia and the oil-exporting countries of West Asia, marked by policy coordination and shared strategic interests.²²

Russia is also engaging with the individual GCC countries on energy issues. Saudi Arabia played a key role in bringing Russia to OPEC Plus. But the US factor has always played a critical role in the Russia–Saudi Arabia relationship. While Russia appreciates its relationship with Saudi Arabia on the issue of energy in the new OPEC Plus framework, it has raised concerns about US President Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia, where he appealed to Riyadh to increase oil production to bring oil prices down. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that 'We highly appreciate our relations and our interaction with Riyadh, and we certainly hope that the building of relations and the development of relations between Riyadh and other world capitals will in no way be directed against us'.²³ This statement highlights existing Russian concerns about US influence on Saudi Arabia, particularly in the energy sector.

Apart from the cooperation on maintaining a stable oil price, the relationship between them faces challenges as both of them have to find and compete for markets to sell their oil, especially in Europe and China.²⁴

Russia's trade with the GCC countries is not very significant, as the total bilateral trade stands at US\$11 billion.²⁵ The UAE and Saudi Arabia are two major trading partners for Russia in the GCC. Russia intends to further increase its bilateral trade with the GCC countries. More importantly, Russia is looking for investment from the oil-rich GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, to get a boost for its economy. Russia wants to tap into the huge Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) of the GCC countries to attract investments from them. Qatar has invested around US\$13 billion in Russia, while Saudi Arabia has invested over US\$2.5 billion, and the UAE and Kuwait have invested around US\$1 billion each in Russia.²⁶ Both Russia as well as GCC are convinced that there are huge prospects in the field of bilateral trade and investment to be explored in future.

Russia–GCC Military Cooperation

In West Asia, Russia has been a key arms supplier to Iran, Syria and Iraq. The US has traditionally remained the foremost supplier of arms to the GCC countries; but in recent years, Russia has been trying to enter the lucrative arms market of the Gulf. It is trying to portray itself as an alternative to the US for supplying weapons to them. Given the depth of American engagement with the individual GCC countries in the military and security arenas, it is highly unlikely for Russia to replace the US anytime soon. However, Russia, on its part, has been trying hard to forge ties with the GCC countries and enter the GCC arms market.

Among the GCC countries, the UAE is the top arms importer from Russia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the UAE imported 5.3 per cent of its total imports from Russia from 2017 to 2021.²⁷ The UAE has expressed its interest in buying the Sukhoi Su-35 from Russia.²⁸ Abu Dhabi has also reportedly brought other weapons from Russia, such as the infantry combat vehicles and air-defence systems.²⁹ In August 2021, Saudi Arabia and Russia signed a crucial defence agreement during the visit of the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman to Moscow.

He also met with the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and discussed strengthening defence and military cooperation between the two countries.³⁰ During the visit of King Salman to Moscow in 2017, Saudi Arabia signed a defence agreement with Russia to buy S-400 air-defence systems, Kornet anti-tank guided missile systems and multiple rocket launchers.³¹ This has implications not only for the US–Saudi defence partnership but also for their bilateral relations as well.

In 2017, in the aftermath of the announcement of the blockade by the Saudi-led quartet, Qatar signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia during the visit of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Doha. Qatari Defence Minister Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah stated that 'Doha wants to purchase Russian technologies for the production of air-defence systems'.³² Saudi Arabia expressed its concerns over Qatar buying the S-400 air-defence system from Russia. Confirming the talks with Doha on the arms supplies, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that 'When we receive bids from our Qatari colleagues for deliveries of Russian military goods, we of course will consider them'.³³ In 2021, to further strengthen their military cooperation, both the countries signed an agreement on military education.³⁴

Russia, GCC and the Syrian Crisis

The crisis in Syria emerged as a challenge to the relationship between Russia and the GCC. Russia supported Bashar Al Assad amid the call for his removal, while the GCC countries supported the opposition coalition forces fighting against the regime. The survival of the Assad regime till its removal was possible because of the unwavering support of Russia. Russia had strong strategic reasons for its involvement in Syria, as it used to be the only country in West Asia where Russia had a strong political connection and military foothold. Russia has a naval facility in Port Tartus in Syria. The Port provided huge military, strategic and economic advantages for Russia in the larger geopolitical scenario, besides its utility for bilateral relations with Syria.³⁵

Russia and Iran have closely coordinated their efforts in Syria, particularly in support of the Assad regime during the protracted civil war. From the outset of the conflict, Iran invested substantial political, financial and military resources to ensure the survival of President Bashar Al Assad's government.

Like Russia, Iran actively supported the regime against opposition forces, deploying units of the IRGC and facilitating the formation and operation of proxy militia groups within Syrian territory. For Iran, the Assad regime – dominated by the Alawite Shia minority – represents a vital ally within its broader objective of consolidating a ‘Shia crescent’ extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. This axis serves as a counterbalance to the strategic interests of the Arab Gulf states. Iran’s entrenched military presence in Syria, coupled with its close alliance with Russia, ran contrary to the GCC states’ policies towards Syria.

The GCC countries, on the other hand, had a very acrimonious relationship with the Assad regime. They accused Assad of violating human rights and using disproportionate force against his people. The GCC countries have been supporting the Syrian opposition coalition in its fight against the regime and have provided funding, political and ideological support to the opposition coalition. The GCC was also at the forefront of Syria’s suspension from the Arab League. Over the years, the GCC countries realised that while they have been on the back foot in Syria in supporting the opposition coalition, Iran has taken advantage of the war and has further strengthened its regional influence. The GCC countries appealed for the removal of the Assad regime by any means, including the use of force and arming the opposition coalition. Therefore, they supported the US in demanding the removal of Assad. Syria has emerged as an important geopolitical battlefield for all these actors in the region.

Response of the GCC States towards the Russia–Ukraine War

After the war between Russia and Ukraine started, the GCC states were under pressure from the US and Russia seeking their support. The GCC states have maintained neutrality over the Russia–Ukraine War and have appealed that the crisis should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation. The GCC countries are known to be allies of the US, having strong economic, military and strategic partnerships. The American failure to obtain the support of the GCC states in Russia’s war against Ukraine indicates a strong relationship between Russia and the GCC. The War does not directly affect the GCC states, but they are concerned about the possible impact on energy and the economy. They have shown no interest in getting drawn into the conflict.

On June 1, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Riyadh to participate in the 5th GCC–Russia Joint Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue at the GCC headquarters in Riyadh. On the same day, the GCC foreign ministers also held a video conference with the Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba. After the meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan stated that the GCC has voiced its ‘unified position towards the Russian-Ukrainian crisis’.³⁶ The GCC expressed its concern over the issue of food security, which has surfaced in some countries as a result of the Russia–Ukraine War, as the supply of grains from Ukraine has been severely affected since the beginning of the war. In defending their position on the Russia–Ukraine War, the GCC has anchored its arguments citing the well-established principles of international law, such as respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs and non-use of force.³⁷

The GCC countries expressed their concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Ukraine and appealed for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. They have provided humanitarian and relief assistance to Ukraine and expressed their support to Ukraine for the food grains to be exported from the country. In April 2022, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief) of Saudi Arabia signed agreements with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide medical and shelter assistance to Ukrainian refugees. As per the agreement, the KSrelief would provide US\$5 million to the WHO to distribute emergency medical supplies, and another US\$5 million to provide shelter items to the Ukrainian refugees in the neighbouring countries.³⁸ The UAE has also provided humanitarian aid relief worth US\$5 million to support the affected civilians of Ukraine.³⁹ Similarly, Qatar has provided humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, including food and medical aid.⁴⁰ Kuwait sent humanitarian assistance worth US\$2 million to support the Ukrainian refugees.⁴¹ Bahrain also provided US\$1 million towards humanitarian aid for the Ukrainian refugees.⁴²

China and the GCC

The relationship between China and the GCC states has been primarily characterised by strong bilateral trade ties and energy cooperation. Beijing has consistently adopted a policy of strategic neutrality with respect to the complex

and often sensitive political and security issues in West Asia. China has largely benefited from the existing regional security architecture, which remains heavily influenced and underpinned by the United States. This US-led regional security framework has provided a stable environment conducive to China's core interests in the region – namely, securing energy supplies and expanding trade and investment. Given the advantages afforded by this status quo, China has shown little inclination to challenge or alter the prevailing security order in the Gulf. Nor has it expressed an interest in assuming the role of a net security provider in a region marked by persistent instability and geopolitical rivalries. Despite internal differences within the GCC and the longstanding tensions between the GCC states and Iran, China has maintained balanced relations with all regional actors. It has effectively engaged both Iran and Saudi Arabia, managing to insulate its economic diplomacy from the region's political and sectarian divisions.

China maintained neutrality in the Qatar crisis and has urged all the parties involved to resolve the crisis through mutual consultation and dialogue. Despite showing its neutrality, China was also concerned about any possible threats to its interests in the Gulf emerging because of the internal rift in the organisation. Therefore, while maintaining neutrality over the crisis, it has continued to engage with the individual member states at a bilateral level. Continuing instability within the GCC was also seen by China as a challenge to its BRI.

China has also established a strong relationship with Iran. In 2021, both countries signed a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement worth US\$400 billion encompassing a range of issues including trade, investment, energy, infrastructure and defence. In January 2022, during his visit to China, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian announced the beginning of the implementation of the agreement.⁴³ China has been balancing its relationship with Iran on the one hand and the GCC countries on the other. While China is aware of the deep-seated rivalry and competition between Iran and the GCC, it has avoided taking sides on the regional issues and focused its attention on engagement on economic and developmental issues.

In recent years, there has been a discernible change in China's approach towards West Asia. It is moving beyond its traditional cooperation in trade

and energy and building strategic partnerships with the Gulf countries.⁴⁴ It is engaging in areas such as innovation, science and technology, climate change, space exploration and counter-terrorism. It is making a cautious and calculated political move in the Gulf as it mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore their diplomatic relations in 2023.

The GCC countries have also refrained from making any anti-China statements regarding China's treatment of Muslims in the restive Xinjiang province. China has established concentration camps for the re-education of its Muslim population. Although officially China calls these vocational and training centres, the Chinese government has detained more than a million Muslims in these re-education centres, which it argues, is necessary to tackle the menace of terrorism and religious extremism. Leaked photos and documents have shown the arbitrary detention and torture of the inmates in these camps.⁴⁵ They are made to undergo months of psychological indoctrination and interrogation by the authorities with the objective of de-radicalising them and making them loyal to the Chinese Communist Party.⁴⁶ This is a part of the efforts of the Chinese government to bring a forced demographic change in the Muslim majority Xinjiang province. Several UN human rights experts have also expressed serious concerns about the human rights situation in China, particularly the treatment of Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.⁴⁷ China has rejected such reports of suppression of its Muslims. These reports have evoked strong responses from all over the world; but the response from the GCC countries has been surprisingly supportive of the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang.

In July 2019, a group of 37 countries, including all the GCC states, wrote a joint letter to the president of the Human Rights Council, appreciating China's counter-terrorism and de-radicalisation measures in the Xinjiang province.⁴⁸ The letter stated that as China faced grave threats of terrorism and radicalisation, and therefore, it took the measures of setting up vocational education and training centres. They also stated that there has been no terrorist attack in Xinjiang province in the last three years, and the fundamental rights of all the people in the province are safeguarded.⁴⁹ In the next month, Qatar withdrew its signature from the letter and stated that it would maintain a neutral stance and offer mediation on the issue. Qatar's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva, Ali Al Mansouri, stated that 'Taking into

account our focus on compromise and mediation, we believe that co-authorising the aforementioned letter would compromise our foreign policy key priorities'.⁵⁰ As members of the OIC, all the GCC states often raise their voices against the mistreatment of Muslims anywhere in the world. But their support for the Chinese treatment of Muslims has often been seen as a huge economic interest they have in maintaining friendly ties with China.

In 2016, China issued its Arab Policy Paper, which broadly elaborated its approach towards the Arab world. The paper emphasised the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', such as 1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, 2) mutual non-aggression, 3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, 4) equality and mutual benefit and 5) peaceful coexistence.⁵¹ China's Arab Policy Paper identifies the Arab world as a key strategic partner in Beijing's broader foreign policy framework. The document outlines an ambitious agenda for comprehensive cooperation, emphasising high-level collaboration in areas such as trade, investment and infrastructure development – particularly within the framework of the BRI. It further highlights cooperation in sectors including space exploration, civilian nuclear energy, education, science and technology and agriculture. In addition to economic and developmental engagement, the policy paper also stresses the importance of deepening strategic ties with the Arab states. It calls for enhanced collaboration in regional security affairs in West Asia, expanded China–Arab military cooperation and joint efforts in addressing non-traditional security challenges, including counter-terrorism. The paper reflects China's intent to elevate its partnership with the Arab world beyond economic interests, toward a more multidimensional and strategic engagement.⁵²

Energy and Trade

China is the world's second-largest oil consumer, consuming around 15 million barrels per day.⁵³ It has the largest population in the world, and its fast-growing economy demands an uninterrupted supply of energy. China's oil reserves are inadequate to meet the huge demands of its requirements. Therefore, China is heavily reliant on the import of energy. In recent years, the GCC countries have emerged as reliable suppliers of energy to China. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Kuwait are important GCC oil suppliers to China, whereas Qatar

is an important supplier of natural gas. China imports around one-third of its total oil imports from the GCC countries.⁵⁴

China imported about 201 million metric tonnes of crude oil from the GCC countries in 2023.⁵⁵ Oman and the UAE are two other important oil suppliers from the GCC that supply 44.78 million tonnes and 33.82 million tonnes, respectively.⁵⁶ China is also the world's largest natural gas consumer. Its consumption of natural gas has constantly grown during the last several years, and, in 2021, it surpassed Japan as the largest importer of natural gas. Qatar supplied around 8 million metric tonnes of LNG to China, which constituted around 20 per cent of China's total LNG imports.⁵⁷ In 2023, China's import of LNG from the GCC was 18 million tonnes, representing around one-fourth of its total imports.⁵⁸ Thus, energy is an important aspect of Chinese engagement with the GCC. While energy supplies from the GCC countries cater to the growing energy needs of China, for the GCC countries, China is an assured and long-term market to sell their energy. Such complementarity in the energy sector between the two has continued to strengthen every year. Although China is diversifying its sources of energy, the importance of the Gulf region for Chinese energy requirements is going to stay in the near future.

China is a major trade partner for the GCC countries. Bilateral trade and commerce between China and the GCC countries is growing at a fast pace. There is also a growing convergence between Chinese technology and the opportunities provided by the GCC economies for a deeper engagement. In 2020, China surpassed the EU to become the top trading partner of the GCC with a total trade of over US\$180 billion.⁵⁹ In 2023, the bilateral total trade between China and the GCC was over US\$279 billion.⁶⁰ The UAE and Saudi Arabia are two leading trade partners of China in the GCC. China primarily imports mineral products, organic chemicals, aluminium and minerals from the GCC countries. It exports machinery appliances, electrical equipment, vehicles, iron and steel, among other items, to the GCC countries.

BRI and the GCC: Convergence of Interests

China announced its BRI in 2013 to 'improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale'.⁶¹ A number of countries from Asia and Africa

have gradually joined the project. The Gulf region has emerged as an important part of the Chinese BRI. Discussion on the participation of the individual GCC countries has been a regular feature in the meetings between their Chinese counterparts. The geographical location of the Gulf countries, as well as the increasing interaction between China and the GCC countries on energy, trade and investment, makes them an important partner of the BRI.⁶² Two crucial choke points in the Indian Ocean adjacent to the GCC countries – the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab El Mandab – are crucial for maintaining the safety of the sea lines of communication, which is important for both China as well as the GCC countries. Though there are security concerns among the GCC states over the Iranian dominance of the Strait of Hormuz and its occasional threats to close the Strait in case of a conflict, China is managing its relations with both. The GCC states also find a lot of convergence in dealing with China on BRI over trade, investment and energy issues, and both have taken a geo-economic approach centred on economic interdependence.⁶³ The big GCC economies have also been convinced that aligning with the BRI would be mutually beneficial for them as well as China.

The energy-rich Gulf sheikhdoms have set targeted visions for themselves to be met in the near future. Saudi Arabia has an ambitious Vision 2030 with the key pillars of ‘a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation’.⁶⁴ Kuwait’s Vision 2035 intends to transform Kuwait into a regional and international financial and economic hub.⁶⁵ The UAE has the ‘Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030’, which is a long-term plan to transform its economy, reduce dependence on oil and diversify the country’s economy.⁶⁶ Similarly, the ‘development of a competitive and diversified economy’ is one of the important pillars of the Qatar National Vision 2030.⁶⁷ Bahrain’s Economic Vision 2030 aims to ‘shift from an economy built on oil wealth to a productive, globally competitive economy’.⁶⁸ Oman’s Vision 2040 aims to achieve ‘a diversified and sustainable economy based on technology, knowledge and innovation’.⁶⁹ China is making serious efforts to align the national development visions of the individual GCC countries with its BRI to establish a long-term economic engagement with these countries.

Free Trade Agreement

In order to further expand bilateral trade with the GCC, China has been negotiating with the GCC to sign a FTA. Negotiations on the FTA between China and the GCC started in 2005. The FTA talks were suspended in 2009, and China decided to protect its domestic chemical industry by maintaining tariffs on GCC petrochemical exports.⁷⁰ Talks were again resumed in 2016, but could not proceed in the expected directions because of the disagreements in the organisation. But recently, both China and the GCC have reiterated their intention of reviving the FTA talks and signing the agreement as soon as possible. In March 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited several countries in West Asia, including the GCC states of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman. During his meeting with the leaders of the GCC, he emphasised the Chinese intention of resuming the FTA talks with the GCC.⁷¹ In January 2022, the GCC Secretary General Nayef bin Hajraf, along with the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, visited China on a five-day tour to strengthen economic ties with the country, including negotiations on the FTA.⁷² They have also agreed to establish a free trade area to provide further impetus to their economic relationship.⁷³

Conclusion

All major external powers operating in the Gulf region pursue distinct strategic interests that shape their respective policies and actions on the ground. While each of these actors possesses certain advantages and faces specific limitations, the United States continues to be the most influential and deeply embedded external power in the region. The GCC states maintain longstanding political, military and security ties with Washington. The US security umbrella has been a central pillar of the regional security architecture, offering assurances against external threats, particularly from Iran. The shared objective of countering Iranian influence has served as a unifying factor in US–GCC relations over the past several decades. Notably, this partnership has demonstrated remarkable continuity, remaining resilient across successive US administrations, regardless of changes in leadership or foreign policy orientation.

Presently, the United States remains uniquely positioned as the only global

actor with both the capacity and the political leverage to mediate intra-GCC disputes and facilitate coordination among its member states. Although concerns have periodically emerged among GCC capitals regarding the consistency of US security commitments – particularly in light of shifting global priorities – the United States remains firmly embedded in the region's security architecture. No other external power currently matches the combination of military capability, strategic engagement and willingness to operate in the complex and often volatile environment of the Gulf.

Russia has been trying to engage deeply with the GCC countries, and it is keen to play an important role in the political, economic, energy and security issues in the Gulf region. Russia's involvement in Syria, where it has been closely working with Iran to save the Assad regime, has negatively affected its relationship with the GCC. But the GCC countries have found Russia to be useful in all the deliberations in the OPEC Plus format in stabilising the oil market. Russia is keen to play its role in regional security in the Gulf region. It has been balancing its relationship with GCC countries as well as Iran. Therefore, it has proposed its own view of collective security in the Gulf region involving regional as well as extra-regional powers. Russia is also eyeing the lucrative arms market of the Gulf. Presently, the US and some European countries are the key suppliers of weapons to the Gulf, but Russia is trying hard to cut deals with the individual GCC countries to supply weapons to them. Although there have been some initiatives between Russia and some of the GCC countries, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for the supply of Russian weapons, the close strategic and military partnership between the US and the GCC countries has been an inhibiting factor in this regard.

Russia has sought to deepen its engagement with the GCC states and has expressed a clear interest in playing a more prominent role in the region's political, economic, energy and security affairs. However, its close cooperation with Iran – particularly in the Syrian conflict where both countries have supported the Assad regime – has complicated Moscow's relations with the GCC states. Despite this, Russia has been viewed as a valuable partner in the OPEC Plus framework, where its coordination with the GCC countries has contributed to efforts aimed at stabilising global oil markets. In addition, Russia has shown a strong interest in expanding its defence exports to the

Gulf – a region with one of the world's most lucrative arms markets. Although the United States and several European countries currently dominate arms sales to the GCC states, Russia has actively pursued defence agreements with individual countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Traditionally, China's interaction with the GCC countries has been economy oriented as it has focused on securing energy supplies from the GCC for its growing economy and focusing on its engagements in bilateral trade and commerce. China is the largest trading partner of the GCC and it intends to sign the FTA to further enhance its trade with the Gulf countries. China, therefore, has maintained a studied neutrality over the internal affairs of the GCC and has appealed that the internal affair should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation within the organisation. The growing economic interaction between China and the GCC countries, the expanding network of China's BRI in the Gulf region and its integration with the national vision documents of each of the GCC countries are other factors driving the GCC countries' silence over the Xinjiang issue.

China's engagement with the GCC states has traditionally been driven by economic considerations, with a primary focus on securing stable energy supplies to meet the demands of its growing economy and expanding bilateral trade and investment ties. As the GCC's largest trading partner, China has pursued deeper economic integration with the region, including ongoing efforts to conclude a FTA that would further enhance commercial relations. Furthermore, the expanding reach of China's BRI in the Gulf – alongside the integration of BRI projects with the national development strategies of individual GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Vision 2031 – has reinforced China's economic footprint in the region. In line with its broader foreign policy principle of non-interference, China has maintained a position of studied neutrality regarding the internal political affairs of the GCC. It has consistently advocated for intra-GCC disputes to be resolved through dialogue and negotiation within the framework of the organisation itself. However, in recent years, China has moved beyond trade and has signed strategic partnership agreements with a number of Gulf countries.

The GCC states have adopted a pragmatic and multidirectional approach

in their foreign relations, engaging with all major external powers based on their respective security and economic imperatives. While the GCC countries continue to rely on the United States as the principal guarantor of regional security and are not inclined to see a reduction in its military presence, they have simultaneously expanded their engagement with other global actors such as Russia and China, both of whom maintain significant economic and energy interests in the region.

Russia and China's foreign policy approaches – characterised by a strong emphasis on trade, investment and energy cooperation – have made them acceptable partners for the GCC states. Despite their adversarial stance towards Iran, the GCC countries share a broad convergence with the United States on countering Iran's regional influence and nuclear ambitions. In contrast, both Russia and China have pursued a careful balancing act, maintaining cordial relations with both Iran and the GCC states. As of now, the GCC countries and all the external players have found the relationship mutually beneficial for each other.

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7

Conclusion

The GCC stands at a critical phase of its history. Since its formation, it has endured numerous vicissitudes, witnessed several regional turbulences, and endeavoured to remain united while facing external challenges. Simultaneously, the GCC has also attempted to manage the multiple internal differences among the member states. The 45 years of its existence as a regional organisation in the turbulent West Asian region have brought much appreciation and criticism from different quarters. The organisation has achieved significant economic and social integration among its member states, but differences have persisted over several issues related to their foreign and security policies. The GCC has been a successful example of economic integration of the oil-rich Gulf monarchies, having established a common market and a customs union. Such instances of successful economic integration reflected their desire to join hands for prosperity and development. They are also considering the establishment of a GCC bank and a common currency, but a consensus has not been reached yet.

Since its inception, the GCC has played a key role in the regional security and stability in the Gulf. The GCC member states have united themselves during the regional conflicts, irrespective of their differences, through all the turbulences that the region has gone through. In the Iran–Iraq War, the GCC countries, despite their differences in approach towards both these countries, adopted a united position to support Saddam Hussein against Iran. The GCC countries were extremely cautious and concerned about the possible

consequences of the war, and its security, economic and political implications for them individually as well as for the GCC as a collective. But Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 completely changed the political and security dynamics in the Gulf region. The GCC countries came together to support Kuwait against the Iraqi invasion. A newly formed regional organisation coming together to support one of its member states against the invasion by its neighbour brought the GCC to the limelight in the regional security and geopolitics in West Asia.

There have been a number of differences among the member states on several occasions. They have tried to sort out their differences amicably within the organisation with mediation and consultation among themselves. But on some occasions, their differences have come out in the open. The most severe difference that came to light in the organisation was in 2017 when the Qatar crisis unfolded. The Qatar crisis exposed the soft underbelly of the GCC. The manner in which the embargo was imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, and the subsequent chain of events that unfolded following the boycott, further widened the cracks in the organisation. The involvement of Iran and Türkiye, two important non-Arab players, further intensified the situation in the region. Suddenly, the regional balance of power was seen to be changing, and the authority of Saudi Arabia and the UAE as two important regional powerhouses came into question. The swift and triumphant intervention by these two non-Arab players in the affairs of the GCC worked to their advantage, seemingly, at the cost of the boycotting countries.

The Qatar crisis severely affected the organisation's relevance in the West Asian region. It raised severe doubts among the key stakeholders in the region about the capability of the organisation to restore its unity. The blockade of Qatar raised questions about the possibility of the organisation surviving through the crisis. There were also apprehensions about the disintegration of the GCC and the possible creation of a new regional entity amid the crisis. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain wanted the GCC to be a strong regional organisation, Qatar, feeling humiliated after the boycott, stated that the alliance needs to be reformed and advocated for a new regional security architecture in the Gulf. Such a call from Qatar questioned the relevance of the GCC as a regional organisation amid the crisis. Qatar's suggestion of

reforming the organisation reflected that the GCC has not only failed in meeting its objectives, but it has also lost its relevance as a regional organisation at a time when it was expected to play a leading role in regional politics and security. Some members acting in unison against another member exposed the GCC's internal differences and challenged its relevance in terms of its internal functioning, effectiveness and its global standing.

The GCC faces a number of internal as well as external challenges. The onset of the Arab Spring and the subsequent turmoil in the region brought new geopolitical and security challenges for the organisation. Severe differences emerged among the member states of the GCC as they often adopted contradictory positions on issues of regional security. For the GCC countries, Iran has remained a delicate factor to deal with. As much as Iran has been a uniting factor in the formation of the GCC, it has now been a reason for discord in the organisation. The GCC member states' engagement with Iran varies from one country to another. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain hold a strong position against Iran, other GCC countries have adopted a slightly more accommodating approach. Even after the restoration of unity at the Al Ula summit in Saudi Arabia in January 2021, Qatar maintains a strong relationship with Iran. Iran's involvement in the affairs of the Arab states, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab unrest, drew the ire of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. The GCC warned Iran not to interfere in the affairs of the Arab countries. However, the Qatar crisis, which compelled Qatar to strengthen its ties with Iran, was a pivotal moment in regional geopolitics. While the organisation got divided, Iran got an opportunity to play a determining role in the region. This changed the balance of power in the sensitive Gulf region. Thus, Iran has emerged as a key issue of discord among GCC countries.

The differences among the GCC countries over their relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood are yet another challenge for the future of the organisation. Qatar's close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and the abhorrence of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain towards the organisation signal an alarming trend in the GCC. Their key foreign policy and regime security issues are linked directly to the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is potentially threatening the unity of the organisation.

Continuing instability in Yemen is yet another challenge for the GCC. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have received missile and drone attacks from the Houthis in Yemen. This has emerged as a huge national security threat for both these countries. Despite having strong militaries and defence systems in place, these two countries have not been able to prevent the Houthi attacks. The situation in Yemen continues to deteriorate, and the Houthis are holding on to a large part of the Yemeni territories, including the capital Sanaa. As long as the Houthis are in an advantageous position, they will continue to attack Saudi Arabia and the UAE in retaliation for their military intervention in Yemen. Furthermore, there have been differences of opinion between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Although it has now been managed, the differences between the two emerged as a threat to the military coalition as the UAE supported the separatist groups in the South fighting against the central government, which Saudi Arabia backs.

Similarly, the continuing civil war in Syria has been another factor in the unity of the GCC countries. Initially, the GCC countries called for the removal of Assad from power in Syria and supported the opposition coalition. Within the opposition coalition, Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the Salafists against the Assad regime. Assad was brought back to the Arab fold in 2023 at the Arab League summit held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Assad managed to cling to power till 2024 with active support from Iran and Russia before being overthrown by the opposition armed militia forces. Ahmed Al Sharaa, the leader of the Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), has become the new president of Syria. The GCC countries have now accepted Sharaa as the legitimate leader of Syria.

Despite the crisis facing the GCC, the organisation has maintained its relationship with the important external powers such as the US, Russia, India and China. The US remains the most powerful and influential extra-regional power in the Gulf. It has established strong political, economic and military partnerships with all the member countries, and it also engages well with the GCC as a collective. The historic strategic partnership between the US and the GCC countries continues to strengthen. The US provides the security umbrella to the GCC, and the US military forces continue to be deployed in all the GCC member states. Despite the crisis in the organisation and differences

of opinion among the member states, their relationship with the US has remained constant. The GCC has always looked up to US support during times of turbulence in the region, regime changes and the subsequent political processes.

In the past decade, the Iranian nuclear issue has been a common point of concern between the US and the GCC. The GCC wants severe sanctions to be imposed on Iran, and it should not be allowed to build a nuclear weapon. The GCC believes that a nuclear-armed Iran will change the regional balance of power in the Gulf region. Therefore, the support of the US to contain the Iranian desire to achieve nuclear weapons is paramount. The signing of the Iranian nuclear deal – the JCPOA – during the Obama administration raised serious concerns in the GCC regarding the future security of the Gulf region. The withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal by the Trump administration in 2018 was supported by the GCC. The GCC believed that the Iranian nuclear deal could only delay Iran from making a nuclear weapon, but it could never completely stop Iran from going nuclear. Therefore, they have advocated that strong economic and technological sanctions be imposed on Iran. After assuming office, President Joe Biden initiated the Vienna round of talks to revive the JCPOA. No significant achievement was made in the Vienna talks. The GCC closely watched the developments as the outcomes of the talks would directly affect its regional security, stability and balance of power in the region. While all the individual GCC countries have a different level of engagement with Iran, as a collective, they all agree on the Iranian nuclear issue.

Russian influence in the Gulf region has diminished significantly since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But in the last decade, Russian involvement in the Gulf region and engagement with the individual GCC countries have increased significantly. Russia has been engaging with the GCC countries on bilateral trade, energy and regional geopolitical issues as well. While Russia lacks the economic and military levers of power that the US enjoys in the region, it has been trying to reestablish its connections with the GCC countries. While the US remains the most dominant player in the defence market in the region, Russia is trying hard to gain a strong foothold in the lucrative arms market in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have

shown interest in buying Russian weapons. This provides Russia with an opportunity to reinforce its relationship with the GCC countries. The GCC countries have found convergence with Russia on the energy issue. The OPEC Plus format cooperation has been helpful for both sides as it regulated oil production and stabilised energy prices, thus benefiting the oil-exporting countries.

The GCC countries have also significantly deepened their ties with China. The GCC-China engagement on bilateral trade and energy issues continues to grow. The Chinese BRI has found resonance among the GCC countries, and they have expressed their support for the Chinese BRI as they find it mutually beneficial for them. China has also been cautious not to intervene in the domestic and regional political affairs in the region. China has made significant inroads into the Gulf region through its aggressive economic engagement with all Gulf countries, including Iran. The Chinese engagement with the GCC countries is so deep and beneficial that they have not reacted strongly to the Chinese 25-year deal with Iran, which includes cooperation on defence and security matters as well. China is also a major buyer of oil and gas from the GCC countries. The GCC countries, surprisingly, have also supported China despite the reports of the ethnic Muslims forced to live in the internment camps for re-education, which the government calls vocational education and training centres. In recent years, China has been building a strategic partnership with the GCC states, moving beyond the traditional cooperation on trade and energy sectors. This will have serious geopolitical implications for the region in future.

The GCC's engagement with India has also expanded in scope and content over the decades. There is a massive transformation in the GCC countries' relationship with India as both sides have moved beyond traditional areas of cooperation and signed strategic partnership agreements. The strategic partnerships between India and the Gulf countries have received a massive thrust in recent years. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the region has further reinforced the existing strategic partnerships with the Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emerged as two reliable partners of India in economic, security and strategic issues. India and the Gulf countries have cultivated their ties, especially picking up on the areas of convergence between

them. Cooperation on security and defence issues has emerged as a new area of cooperation between India and the GCC. While the previous emphasis on economic ties, energy relationships and the diaspora connection remain strong and dominant aspects of the India–Gulf relationship, the emerging threats and challenges as a result of the regional turbulence in West Asia have brought India and the GCC countries together to strengthen their relationship in the defence and security arena.

India's policy of non-intervention in the domestic and regional affairs in the Gulf region has been a dominant approach towards the GCC during the crisis. The leaders of the Gulf countries have appreciated such a policy, but at the same time, it has been criticised in some quarters, and India's policy has been labelled as reactive, which is limited to the protection of its interests. India has often been criticised for shying away from its responsibilities in the Gulf – a region where it has huge stakes and interests. Nonetheless, India's engagement with the Gulf countries has continued to strengthen despite the crisis and cracks in the organisation. India's engagements in the field of trade, energy, diaspora, defence and security issues, as well as the strategic partnership with the countries of the GCC, have strengthened considerably.

Countering terror has emerged as a key issue of cooperation between India and the GCC countries. While India and the GCC countries have been victims of terrorism, the beginning of the Arab unrest, leading to the emergence of several new terrorist organisations and the spread of terrorist activities throughout the region, especially by ISIS and Al Qaeda, brought both India and the GCC closer together over the issue. The leaders have often reiterated their commitment to fighting terrorism together. The GCC countries, like India, believe that terrorism and religious extremism are a threat to peace and stability in the world. They also believe that, in the age of modern science and technology, terrorists have been using advanced means of communication and weapons to launch terrorist attacks across regions in different countries. Thus, active cooperation and collaboration among all the countries are required to tackle such challenges. India and the GCC countries have agreed to share information and intelligence on the terrorist organisations, their leadership, strategies, movement of the leadership, funding, etc., to tackle the menace of terror.

Similarly, maritime piracy has emerged as another key area of cooperation between India and the GCC countries. India and the GCC countries have been victims of piracy attacks in the western Indian Ocean, particularly by Somali pirates. Piracy in the strategic waters of the Western Indian Ocean not only results in huge economic loss and demand for ransom but also leads to disruption of the sea lines of communication. As seafaring nations, this is extremely crucial for both India and the GCC countries to join hands together to maintain the safety of the sea lines of communication. Increasing activities of piracy in the Indian Ocean directly affect the national economies of all the countries. Therefore, there are huge convergences between India and the GCC countries in fighting piracy in the region.

India's energy dependence on the GCC countries is going to continue in the coming years. India's high rate of energy demand, driven by population growth and industrialisation, is expected to continue, making the Gulf region crucial for meeting the country's increasing energy needs. Despite the crisis in the GCC, India has been successful in building strategic partnerships with the GCC countries in the energy sector, thereby moving beyond the traditional buyer–seller relationship. In the last decade, significant progress has been made in this regard between India and the GCC countries. Although India is diversifying its energy import sources and purchasing oil from Africa, the Caribbean, the US and Russia; the GCC countries, due to their proximity and traditional energy partnership, will continue to be India's most important energy source.

India's strategic partnership with the GCC countries has touched new heights. Meaningful interaction in all the important fields has been taking place, and there is a higher level of trust working in the relationship. The increasing exchange of high-level visits and the convergence of interests on key issues have further bolstered the India–GCC relationship. This was reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic when India offered all possible help and support, including medicines and healthcare professionals, to the GCC countries. In return, the GCC countries also supported India in fighting the pandemic. India supplied the COVID-19 vaccine to all the GCC countries as well. Cooperation on health issues has emerged as an important area of cooperation with huge potential ahead. Successful cooperation during the

pandemic is a reflection of the growing India–GCC strategic partnership. The ‘Think West’ policy of the government has been a key element to push further and deepen the engagement with its ‘extended neighbourhood’, and such an approach has been enthusiastically reciprocated by the GCC. The convergence of interests between India and the GCC in the changing geopolitical context in West Asia would contribute to further strengthening the relationship in future.

During the last 45 years of its existence, the organisation has gone through many vicissitudes. It has had an impact on the regional political, economic and security dynamics of the region and beyond. In the last decade, the challenges stemming from the Arab uprisings severely impacted the organisation. This has not only affected the internal cohesion of the organisation but has also affected its relationship with the regional countries and external powers. Several challenges remain for the GCC as it is trying to move on in the aftermath of the Qatar crisis. Maintaining the unity among the member states and further increasing its relevance remains the most important challenge for the GCC at present. Any further cracks among the member states may prove fatal for the organisation and negatively impact the peace and regional security in the Gulf.

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