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Analysing EU-Gulf Relations in a Context of Global Crisis

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Gulf Geopolitics: Intra-Regional Dynamics and Conflicts

Intra-GCC rivalries and divisions reflect divergent political trajectories and competing economic visions. Though confidence and cohesion among GCC countries seemed to be restored with the Al-Ula Declaration in 2021 – which marked the formal end of the Gulf crisis¹ – the legacy of this agreement remains contested². Unlike the vague and ultimately ineffective Riyadh Agreements of 2013 and 2014, the Al-Ula Declaration undoubtedly initiated a more sustained reconciliation process, symbolised by the 2024 launch of the GCC “Vision for Regional Security” and a growing emphasis on cooperation over conflict³. Still, the embers of past rivalries continue to glow, manifesting in divergent strategic priorities, regional alignments, and economic competition.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to compete for regional leadership, with differing economic models — Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030” setting a roadmap for the diversification of the Saudi economy (though vulnerable to the security and geopolitical issues, as already observed⁴), while the UAE seeks to cement its position as a global partner and financial and logistics hub through the “We the UAE 2031’ Vision” initiative⁵. This competition extends to different foreign policy priorities, with the UAE often acting more assertively in regional conflicts by supporting non-state actors⁶ while Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain a more central diplomatic role. Qatar, meanwhile, has consolidated an independent foreign policy built on soft power tools and strategic mediation, reinforcing its role in hosting negotiations for various regional crises, including Afghanistan and Gaza, and positioning itself as a diplomatic broker, contrasting with the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s more interventionist approaches⁷.

For its part, Oman has carved out a unique position within the GCC by consistently championing quiet diplomacy and consensus-oriented solutions over bloc politics or confrontation⁸. Building on a longstanding tradition of neutrality, Muscat has played a critical facilitating role in de-escalating tensions across the region – most notably by helping lay the groundwork for the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement signed in Beijing in 2023, following years of discreet mediation alongside Iraq – working in parallel to ease strained relations between Iran and other Arab states, such as Bahrain and

¹ In 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt severed ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and aligning too closely with Iran and Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.

² G.M. Feierstein, “The GCC al-Ula Statement: Perhaps a step, but not a solution”, *Middle East Institute*, 6 January 2021.

³ K.C. Ulrichsen, “GCC Struggles: Internal Rivalries, Fragmentation and Lost Opportunities”, *ISPI*, 15 October 2024.

⁴ K.C. Ulrichsen, “De-Risking the Neighborhood: The Security Politics of Saudi Vision 2030”, in E. Ardemagni (ed.), *The Security Side of Gulf Visions – Adapting Defence to the Connectivity Age*, ISPI, 2024, 21-32.

⁵ ‘We the UAE 2031’ Vision, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/innovation-and-future-shaping/we-the-uae-2031-vision>

⁶ As Andreas Krieg notes, “[...] Occurring in a conflict environment where state institutions have disintegrated or are weak, Abu Dhabi’s assistance to non-state actors is not tied to objectives of building responsible, transparent and accountable security sectors. Instead, in all cases, Emirati security assistance relies on both vertical and horizontal practises that help develop networked assemblages as means of small state Realpolitik in what Abu Dhabi perceives to be a regional competition over influence.” (A. Krieg, “Security assistance to surrogates – how the UAE secures its regional objectives”, *Mediterranean Politics*, 29 (4), 2023, 454–477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183659>); the UAE’s support for non-state actors in fragile contexts and its adherence to a politically realist approach are evident not only in the cases discussed in this paper, or in its backing of the Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA) in Libya, but also in the aftermath of the recent fall of the al-Asad regime, given Abu Dhabi’s maintained relations with al-Asad’s Syria. The UAE’s cautious and pragmatic engagement with post-Asad Syria fairly shows Abu Dhabi’s strategic blueprint for the region; see G. Cafiero, “Why the UAE approaches the new Syria with caution”, *Amwaj Media*, 17 January 2025.

⁷ M. Bordo, “Il Qatar nello Scacchiere Internazionale”, *ID – Informazioni della Difesa*, no. 3, 2024, 22-26.

⁸ G. Cafiero, “Oman’s Quiet Role in Calming Regional Tensions”, *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 16 October 2024.

Egypt. While not pursuing regional leadership in the way Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or even Qatar have, Oman has maintained its relevance by positioning itself as a trusted interlocutor, quietly enabling diplomacy between rivals in moments of regional crisis.

Despite its small size, Bahrain has also carried out a unique strategic path. Manama has pursued an assertive and distinctive regional policy, navigating sectarian dynamics and geopolitical pressures by engaging with both Iran and Israel, being the only Arab state to sign a security agreement with the latter under the Abraham Accords⁹. Simultaneously, it balances deepened defence ties with the US, including participation in the Red Sea's Prosperity Guardian mission, with a growing strategic partnership with China, underscoring its role as a critical yet often overlooked player in Gulf security.

Lastly, Kuwait continues to pursue a policy of cautious neutrality shaped by its turbulent history and delicate geographic position¹⁰. As a matter of fact, Kuwait has long sought to balance relations with regional rivals like Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia while maintaining strong ties with the U.S. and gradually expanding partnerships with powers like China and Russia. Amid intensifying regional polarisation, Kuwait has positioned itself as a pragmatic mediator, resisting normalisation with Israel and preserving channels of dialogue even with contentious actors, reflecting its enduring commitment to stability and balance in Gulf politics.

The intertwining of both global and regional crises – namely, the conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan and Yemen – has also deeply shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Gulf, influencing intra-GCC relations and shaping alliances and rivalries. Although coherent and unified in their condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, have had different approaches to dealing with the crisis itself and their relationship with the Russian Federation, opting for avoiding to politically and economically isolate Russia, seen as a crucial global energy player while also being a member of the OPEC+ alliance¹¹. While Qatar's position in condemning Russia's invasion was among the clearest¹², with Doha pledging aid to Ukraine and even hosting Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who met al-Thani in June 2024¹³, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's positions were more blurred. As a matter of fact, the latter was widely criticised for abstaining to condemn Russia's invasion at the UN Security Council in 2022 (and for increasing economic ties with Russia since the beginning of the conflict as well¹⁴), while the first worried about maintaining good ties with western countries and with the Russian Federation as well, due to economic calculations and also to the good personal ties the Saudi Prince Bin Salman has with Vladimir Putin.

While the war in Ukraine has led Gulf countries to adopt more nuanced positions—rooted in the shared belief that isolating a key partner like Russia could be counterproductive—the Israel-Palestine conflict remains a divisive issue. Saudi Arabia and UAE pursued normalisation with Israel in the

⁹ W. Roebuck, "The Sources of Bahrain's Confident Regional Policy", *ISPI*, 17 July 2024.

¹⁰ K. Al-Jaber, "Kuwait, Balancer in the Gulf", *Gulf International Forum*, 4 August 2020.

¹¹ A.L. Jacobs, "Gulf Mediation in the Ukraine Crisis", *The Arab Gulf States Institution in Washington*, 1 April 2025.

¹² Nevertheless, Qatar has important economic ties with Russia, especially in the energy sector. Lavrov's recent visit to Doha to reach an agreement for new economic cooperation between Russia and Qatar demonstrates both countries' interest in maintaining strong ties; see "Russia-Qatar 2025 Trade & Investment: Update", *Russia's Pivot to Asia*, 27 February 2025.

¹³ A. Lucente, "Following Zelenskyy's visit, how can Qatar help Ukraine in Russia mediation?", *Al-Monitor*, 8 June 2024.

¹⁴ B. Faucon, R. Jones, "U.A.E. Cashes in on Russia's Economic Woes", *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2023.

past¹⁵ – despite the domestic opposition – but in the shadow of the Gaza War and with the new Trump administration, the future of these efforts remains uncertain. If Saudi Arabia is no longer a neutral diplomatic ground, given the crown prince’s opposition to Trump’s plan for Gaza¹⁶ and the harsh condemnation of Israel’s actions in the conflict¹⁷ (and, last but not least, the fact that Riyadh, in a potential normalisation process with Israel, will consider the creation of a Palestinian state the paramount issue¹⁸) the UAE seems to row against the other Arab states, lobbying the Trump administration to reject the post-war plan drafted by Egypt and endorsed by the Arab League¹⁹, showing how its priorities do not include Gaza nor anything that could damage a possible engagement with Israel²⁰. On the other hand, Qatar played a pivotal role in diplomatic negotiations between Israel and Hamas, helping to broker a ceasefire agreement and the release of hostages. Still, its hosting of the political office of Hamas from 2011 to the expulsion in November 2024, in conjunction with the ambiguous financial support Doha supposedly gives to the Palestinian political organisation²¹, has always been a controversial point.

Nonetheless, the most polarising arenas for Gulf powers—particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia—remain the conflicts in Yemen and Sudan, where divergent strategic priorities have increasingly come to the fore and have led to conflicting approaches. In Yemen, the UAE, while initially forming part of the Saudi-led coalition (along with Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Senegal) backing Yemeni President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi against Ansar Allah rebels, progressively disengaged from direct intervention, pursuing a divide-and-rule approach – a pattern that appears to be a common UAE strategy in different regional scenarios²² – shifting to a proxy warfare model, relying on local militias such as the Security Belt Forces (SBF) and eventually backing the Southern Transitional Council (STC) that, after the Riyadh Agreement in 2019, acquired international legitimacy, enabling the UAE to reinforce a long-term presence independent of the broader Saudi-led coalition. Similarly, in Sudan, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE initially supported the post-Bashir transitional government, with Abu Dhabi later shifting its backing toward the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemedti”), viewing him as a potential strongman aligned with UAE’s strategic interests in the region. The UAE has reportedly facilitated arms transfers and financial support to the RSF through covert networks, leveraging gold trade and logistics routed via the Emirates²³. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, has maintained a more ambivalent stance, balancing its support for state institutions with efforts to de-escalate the conflict. As the civil war intensified, Emirati and Saudi efforts to stabilise Sudan have increasingly diverged, contributing to the broader regional rivalry and complicating international mediation efforts²⁴.

¹⁵ With different outcomes, though. The UAE only ratified a normalisation agreement with Israel in 2020, in the framework of the Abraham Accords.

¹⁶ S. Mathews, “As Trump looks to turn page on Gaza and Ukraine, all roads lead to Riyadh”, *Middle East Eye*, 17 February 2025.

¹⁷ F. Gardner, H. Khalil, “Saudi crown prince says Israel committing ‘genocide’ in Gaza”, *BBC*, 12 November 2024.

¹⁸ A. Asmar, “In a normalization agreement with Israel, Saudi Arabia should settle for nothing less than Palestinian statehood”, *Atlantic Council*, 26 April 2025.

¹⁹ S. Mathews, “UAE lobbying Trump administration to reject Arab League Gaza plan, officials say”, *Middle East Eye*, 17 March 2025.

²⁰ S. Mathews, “UAE spymaster's trip to US shows AI is in, and Israel's war on Gaza is out”, *Middle East Eye*, 19 March 2025.

²¹ J. Mounier, “Qatar, Iran, Turkey and beyond: Hamas's network of allies”, *France 24*, 14 October 2024.

²² A. Krieg, “How Abu Dhabi built an axis of secessionists across the region”, *Middle East Eye*, 28 March 2025.

²³ A. Krieg, “Gold, arms and mercenaries: On UAE's shadowy networks in Sudan”, *Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2023.

²⁴ T. Mohammad, “How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxy War”, *Foreign Policy*, 12 July 2023.

Consolidating EU-GCC Ties: Diplomatic Momentum and Political Achievements

In an era of heightened polarisation across the Middle East, Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy have become vital tools for the European Union to engage with a broader range of regional actors, including those it struggles to reach through official diplomatic channels, such as Iran. Within this context, May 2022 marked a turning point with the EU's adoption of the Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf"²⁵, signalling long-overdue recognition of the GCC states not only as pivotal regional players but also as emerging middle powers in the global order. Although previously perceived in the Gulf as economically relevant yet politically marginal – due also to the EU struggle to adapt to the new multipolar order in the region²⁶ – the EU has begun to reshape its presence through more coherent and strategic initiatives, starting from the appointment of Luigi Di Maio as Special Representative for the Gulf in June 2023²⁷. In light of these events, 2024 has been the year in which the foundations of this strategic partnership have been laid through an exceptional and unprecedented number of events and meetings: the first GCC-EU Regional Security Dialogue on 24 January 2024²⁸, a structured security dialogue at the level of Senior Officials, addressing Cybersecurity, Counterterrorism, and Disaster Preparedness related to climate change; the EU-GCC High Level Forum on Regional Security and Cooperation on 22 April 2024²⁹, gathering EU Foreign Ministers and their GCC counterparts; the first edition of EUDA (European Union Diplomatic Academy) in May 2024³⁰, a joint training and simulations for young diplomats from the GCC and the EU at the College of Europe in Bruges; the 13th Economic Dialogue between the EU and the GCC in Doha in September 2024³¹; the 1st EU-GCC Summit held in Brussels on 16 October 2024³² (which will be discussed further); the 8th EU-GCC Business Forum in Doha in November 2024³³. In addition to the EU's intense diplomatic efforts in 2024, the launch of the European Chamber of Commerce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (ECCKSA) marked a key step in deepening economic ties, helping diversify economic relations between the EU, Saudi Arabia and the whole GCC region³⁴.

Among all these events and meetings, the 1st EU-GCC Summit is where the EU and the GCC defined a joint strategic approach to key areas of mutual interest, articulating a common roadmap around two

²⁵ *Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf"*, 18 May 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-%E2%80%9Cstrategic-partnership-gulf%E2%80%9D_en

²⁶ C. Bianco, "A Gulf Apart: How Europe can gain influence with the Gulf Cooperation Council", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2020.

²⁷ *EU appoints a new Special Representative for the Gulf region*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/15/eu-appoints-a-new-special-representative-for-the-gulf-region/>

²⁸ *GCC: first Regional Security Dialogue with the EU held in Riyadh*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/gcc-first-regional-security-dialogue-eu-held-riyadh_en

²⁹ *EU- Gulf Cooperation Council High Level Forum takes place in Luxembourg on 22 April*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-gulf-cooperation-council-high-level-forum-takes-place-luxembourg-22-april_en

³⁰ *EUDA: Council establishes the first ever European Union Diplomatic Academy to train EU diplomats*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/21/euda-council-establishes-the-first-ever-european-union-diplomatic-academy-to-train-eu-diplomats/>

³¹ *GCC-EU 13th Economic Dialogue kicks off in Qatar*, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3182605&language=en>

³² *1st European Union-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit Joint Statement*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/k3wff2ewp/eu-gcc-joint-statement-final-2.pdf>

³³ *Eighth EU-GCC Business Forum kicks off in Doha*, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=3206512&Language=en>

³⁴ *EU welcomes first European Chamber of Commerce in the Gulf, based in Saudi Arabia*, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-welcomes-first-european-chamber-commerce-gulf-based-saudi-arabia-2024-05-08_en

general axes of partnership. The first axis focuses on sustainable prosperity and security, and it is grounded in six strategic pillars³⁵:

1. Increasing trade, investment, and economic cooperation, reaffirming a commitment to a strategic trade and investment partnership, prioritising sectoral collaboration in areas such as green and digital transitions, clean technologies, and supply chain resilience, and agreeing to advance talks on a potential GCC-EU Free Trade Agreement and to foster regulatory harmonisation, intellectual property protection, and enhanced private sector engagement through joint forums and investment platforms.
2. Energy cooperation and climate action, with the EU and GCC committing to deeper coordination on energy security and transition, particularly through renewable energies, hydrogen, and carbon abatement technologies, and reaffirming their climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, aiming to jointly advance efforts on biodiversity, desertification, and pollution reduction, while supporting multilateral initiatives like COP28, COP29, and future UN-led conferences.
3. Enhancing interregional connectivity, pillar that sees the EU and GCC pledging to deepen cooperation across digital technologies, transport, energy infrastructure, and critical supply chains, with emphasis placed on joint efforts in digital transformation, sustainable infrastructure, and secure data and energy networks—while supporting initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)³⁶ and the EU's Global Gateway³⁷.
4. Development cooperation and humanitarian aid, with a commitment to closer coordination on disaster response, crisis funding, and the protection of humanitarian space – including through structured links between their emergency agencies – and the alignment of efforts on major global initiatives, such as COP29, the 2030 Agenda, and upcoming international conferences on development and social policy.
5. Joint action to address global security challenges, with both actors committing to enhance regional security through structured dialogues, cooperation on counterterrorism, cyber threats, and peacebuilding, pledging to deepen efforts against organised crime, human trafficking, and terrorist financing, while recognising the GCC's growing role in mediation and conflict resolution at both regional and international levels.
6. People-to-people connections as a cornerstone of the EU-GCC partnership, highlighting mutual efforts to pursue visa facilitation, expand academic and cultural exchanges—particularly through Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe—and deepening cooperation in education, youth, and creative industries, with both parties also committed to promoting tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and human rights through structured dialogues and joint initiatives.

The second axis focuses on advancing a strategic partnership for long-term stability and peace³⁸, with a targeted engagement and a coordinated approach to conflict resolution and crisis management towards ten key contexts identified as conflict zones, sources of regional instability, or strategic security: Ukraine, Gaza and the West Bank, Lebanon, Iran, the Red Sea, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Somalia. Reflecting the EU and GCC's joint strategic engagement to uphold international law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in regions marked by active conflict and geopolitical volatility,

³⁵ *1st European Union-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit Joint Statement*, 2-6.

³⁶ “G20 summit: Transport project to link India to Middle East, Europe unveiled”, *Al-Jazeera*, 9 September 2023.

³⁷ *Global Gateway*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

³⁸ *1st European Union-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit Joint Statement*, 7-12.

the partners call for immediate ceasefires, support UN-led peace processes, and reinforce humanitarian access, with a shared emphasis on protecting civilians and critical infrastructure, also condemning violations of international law—including Russia’s war in Ukraine and settler violence in the West Bank—while promoting initiatives like the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution and maritime security operations such as EUNAVFOR ASPIDES³⁹. This axis also reinforces joint diplomacy, mediation, and nuclear non-proliferation as core tools for regional de-escalation and long-term peacebuilding.

Strengthening EU-GCC Relations in 2025: Challenges and Pitfalls

The EU-GCC relationship has entered a critical phase. While recent diplomatic engagements have generated optimism, the real challenge lies in transitioning from dialogue to tangible outcomes, and although 2024 was marked by heightened communication with key events such as the EU-GCC Summit and a series of high-level dialogues on regional security, economics, and business, without decisive action, the risk of the relationship losing momentum remains high, potentially sidelining the efforts made thus far.

One of the most pressing concerns is the lack of actionable, concrete policies. The rhetoric of mutual commitment, as seen in summit declarations, often remains general, with the use of vague formulas such as “explore opportunities” or “take forward our discussions”, statements that, though optimistic, fail to address the urgency of making measurable progress. The outcome of such vague discourse is the risk of losing political credibility and trust between the blocs: the EU-GCC Summit, for instance, failed to deliver any breakthrough, overshadowed by watered-down language that undermined the momentum needed for real progress. At the institutional level, another challenge stems from the EU’s internal complexity: for example, the establishment of multiple diplomatic posts for the Gulf region – such as the Special Representative for the Gulf in 2023 and the creation of the new Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf in 2025, led by the Commissioner for the Mediterranean Dubravka Šuica⁴⁰ – has led to potential overlaps in roles and responsibilities. This bureaucratic fragmentation risks confusion and inefficiencies, potentially undermining the coherence of the EU’s approach towards the GCC.

Political cooperation remains the most complex and consequential aspect of the EU-GCC relationship. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have exposed sharp divergences: while GCC states resisted aligning with EU positions on Russia, some even enabling sanctions evasion, Europe's disjointed response to Gaza has discredited its normative rhetoric in the region⁴¹. This has derailed sensitive cooperation areas, including maritime security, where GCC states declined to participate in the EU’s ASPIDES mission and suspended momentum on flagship projects like the IMEC. Despite this, the joint launch of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution (2SS) in late 2024⁴², co-initiated by the EU, Saudi Arabia, and Norway, stands out as a rare success, with

³⁹ EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eunavfor-aspides_en?s=410381

⁴⁰ *One sea, three continents: a new Directorate General to strengthen Mediterranean and Gulf partnerships*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_395

⁴¹ L. Cook, “UN chief urges the EU to avoid ‘double standards’ over Gaza and Ukraine”, *Associated Press News*, 21 March 2024.

⁴² *Israel/Palestine: Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution announced in the UNGA margins*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/israelpalestine-global-alliance-implementation-two-state-solution-announced-unga-margins_en

regular high-level meetings, culminating in a planned UN conference in June 2025⁴³, signalling a shift towards a more pragmatic and focused cooperation. Yet the initiative was barely acknowledged in the EU-GCC Summit communiqué, reflecting a broader weakness, namely Brussels' apparent preference for wide-ranging alignment over targeted, high-impact political engagement. Building on the 2SS alliance and deepening cooperation on regional hotspots like Syria – where EU-GCC understandings seemingly brought to the EU decision for a sanction relief⁴⁴ –, Yemen, and Lebanon could provide a path forward—one that treats the GCC as a political partner, not just an economic one.

Still, the economic front is where a potential for closer ties is evident, being the EU GCC's second biggest trade partner – after China⁴⁵ – representing 11,1% of the GCC's total global trade in goods in 2023 (total trade in goods in 2023 amounted to €170,1 billion), and the GCC's fourth biggest export partner, with 7,5% of the region's exports coming to the EU in 2023⁴⁶. Despite these facts, the EU and GCC seem to be hesitant to capitalise on their shared interest: the paramount issue for the EU seems to be still the talks around the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the GCC, which have been ongoing since 1990, and have repeatedly stalled due to the GCC resistance to EU human rights clauses and the EU's opposition to GCC's export tariffs, despite progress like the institution of a GCC customs union in 2003, a Sustainable Impact Assessment (SIA) in 2004⁴⁷, and a near-final draft in 2008, with no breakthrough since⁴⁸. Nowadays, the debate around the FTA seems to move around the pursuit of an agreement at the regional level versus the will to close tailored bilateral agreements with the single member states. The recent opening to talks about a free trade agreement with the UAE seems to show the preference for the second strategy⁴⁹.

The energy ties between the EU and the GCC are also a sensitive matter, and the cooperation on this front can be crucial. This potential interdependency has already shown promising prospects in 2023, when Qatar became one of the most significant suppliers of liquefied natural gas (LNG), with 15,1 tons delivered to Europe (19% of the total exportation), offsetting the loss of Russian gas imports⁵⁰. Moreover, green energy presents a promising area for cooperation as well, since the energy transition to low-carbon energy supplies is a field where GCC countries are investing⁵¹. In that context, Europe might be a key market: the EU-GCC Cooperation on Green Transition Project⁵² seems to row this way, aiming to advance the green transition through policy dialogue, support for European companies, strategic collaboration on renewable hydrogen, promotion of circular economy and

⁴³ “Macron announces France-Saudi partnership to co-host conference on creating Palestinian state”, *Le Monde*, 3 December 2024.

⁴⁴ *Syria: EU suspends restrictive measures on key economic sectors*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/02/24/syria-eu-suspends-restrictive-measures-on-key-economic-sectors/>

⁴⁵ “GCC region remains a significant player in global trade: report”, *Gulf Business*, 28 January 2025.

⁴⁶ *Gulf region – EU trade relations with the Gulf region*, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/gulf-region_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20GCC%27s,GCC%27s%20number%20two%20import%20partner.

⁴⁷ *Commission Position Paper - Trade Sustainability Impact Assessment of the trade negotiations between the EC and the Gulf Cooperation Council*, <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/09242a36-a438-40fd-a7af-fe32e36cbd0e/library/3da4f434-2f51-45f5-a710-7465e61dcd11/details?download=true>

⁴⁸ K. Sidlo, “Bridging Regions? EU-GCC Relations on Trade and Infrastructure”, *ISPI*, 15 October 2024.

⁴⁹ *EU and UAE agree to launch free trade talks*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/read_25_1043

⁵⁰ *Qatar's role in LNG supply to Europe*, <https://globallnghub.com/qatars-role-in-lng-supply-to-europe.html>

⁵¹ J. Ingram, “Europe-GCC Energy Ties Rebound in Post-Ukraine-Invasion World”, *ISPI*, 15 October 2024.

⁵² *The EU-GCC Cooperation on Green Transition Project*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-gcc-cooperation-green-transition-project-building-sustainable-future-together_en

nature-based solutions, and strengthened climate diplomacy with non-state actors. Anyway, there are still concerns about many aspects of this potential cooperation: first of all, Europe will unlikely meet the targets for the production and import of green hydrogen set for 2030⁵³, which is one of the keystones of the EU-GCC Cooperation on Green Transition; also, a recent European suggestion that Qatari gas could be fined under due diligence laws related to forced labour and environmental damage has sparked strong reactions from Doha, with Qatar's Energy Minister warning that if such penalties were enforced, Qatar would halt future gas shipments to Europe, jeopardising one of the EU's key energy relationships and threatening to undermine trust and deeper economic ties between the two regions⁵⁴. In addition, the recent introduction of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)⁵⁵, which will place a carbon cost on certain imports like fertilisers, steel, and cement to avoid "carbon leakage" (when industries relocate to countries with looser environmental rules), and will be fully implemented in 2026, could pose more interrogatives on this cooperation if petrochemicals were added to the list of taxed products. Still, CBAM presents a strategic opportunity to gain competitiveness in the European market for GCC producers: GCC countries are known for efficient and lower-emission facilities⁵⁶, thus are well-positioned to benefit as their products will face lower CBAM charges compared to higher-emission competitors; furthermore, in high-demand areas like green and blue fertilisers, which will face minimal or no CBAM taxation, GCC countries could be the most competitive market⁵⁷. CBAM thus shows how, although GCC exports to Europe have been limited due to more attractive netbacks in Asia, the evolving EU policy landscape may prompt a shift in strategy.

Security cooperation presents another significant challenge. Although some analysts argue that the EU should refrain from expanding its engagement in the GCC to compete with other global powers in the security domain⁵⁸, a more strategic approach would be to foster a cooperative security paradigm – one that draws on mutual strengths by aligning specialised expertise and fostering innovation hubs – exploiting the geographic proximity. This perspective is increasingly relevant in the current context, as rising tensions in the Middle East have accelerated the urgency for closer EU-GCC coordination on regional security: the war in Gaza, the looming threat of confrontation between Iran and Israel, and the proliferation of non-state armed actors and advanced weapons systems such as drones and ballistic missiles, have led both sides to intensify high-level dialogues, with the recent forums, such as the aforementioned GCC-EU Regional Security Dialogue in Riyadh and the EU-GCC High-Level Forum on Regional Security and Cooperation in Luxembourg, reflecting a new momentum and mutual recognition of shared threats. While GCC member states have historically diverged in their approaches to Iran, there is a growing consensus on the need for diplomatic de-escalation combined with strategic cooperation to deter external interference and asymmetric threats. In this context, GCC countries see the EU not as a substitute for the US security umbrella, but as a valuable partner for intelligence sharing, cyber and maritime security collaboration, and capacity-building through joint

⁵³ *Renewable hydrogen-powered EU: auditors call for a reality check*, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/news?ref=NEWS-SR-2024-11>; K. Abnett, "EU's green hydrogen goals not realistic, auditors say", *Reuters*, 17 July 2024.

⁵⁴ "Qatar threatens to stop EU gas sales if fined under due diligence law, FT reports", *Reuters*, 23 December 2024.

⁵⁵ *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism*, https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/carbon-border-adjustment-mechanism_en

⁵⁶ A. Al-Sarihi, "The GCC and the road to net zero", *Middle East Institute*, 2 March 2023.

⁵⁷ J. Walters, M. Chahuan, M. H. Finn, "CBAM from non-EU perspective: GCC producers", *GPCA – Gulf Petrochemicals & Chemicals Association*, 26 December 2024.

⁵⁸ B. Al-Saif, "EU-GCC Relations in 2025: Will Actions Speak Louder Than Words?", *Arab Reform Initiative*, 27 February 2025.

exercises and knowledge transfer⁵⁹. Among these domains, maritime security is emerging as a particularly promising area for practical cooperation, given the strategic significance of Gulf waterways as critical arteries for global trade and energy transit: ensuring the safety of these routes has become a shared imperative, and the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the Northwestern Indian Ocean⁶⁰, active since 2022, exemplifies a framework that could be deepened by more structured engagement with coastal GCC countries – building on early successes such as cooperation with Oman, when a coordination and cooperation protocol signed in June 2024 between EUNAVFOR Operation ATALANTA and the Royal Navy of Oman marked a step forward in institutionalising naval collaboration⁶¹. Looking ahead, streamlining and linking existing EU maritime missions across the region while anchoring them in partnerships with Gulf states could help forge a more responsive, resilient maritime security architecture, enabling both sides to better address threats ranging from piracy to hostile state and non-state actors operating in strategic waters. Nevertheless, in other security domains, significant structural and political obstacles remain: the EU's internal fragmentation, driven by divergent strategic priorities, undermines its credibility as a coherent security actor, while on the GCC side, although the 2017-2021 crisis has been formally resolved, intra-bloc political divergences persist, particularly regarding military cooperation formats. Still, the creation of thematic working groups and the GCC launch of the “Vision for Regional Security”⁶² signal a concrete willingness to operationalise cooperation with external actors like the EU, and, in the short term, this evolving alignment could lay the groundwork for a security partnership that addresses shared vulnerabilities, even if a fully institutionalised defence cooperation remains elusive for now.

Safeguarding Strategic Coherence in EU-GCC Relations

As the EU-GCC relationship moves into a decisive phase: Gulf states, no longer as dependent on the United States as they once were, are increasingly acting as autonomous players capable of engaging with a wide range of global actors, including Russia and China, thereby contributing to a reshaping of the international order and challenging traditional geopolitical alignments. The future must therefore prioritise structured, strategic engagement over fragmented cooperation, but the greatest risk ahead lies in the proliferation of bilateral tracks between individual EU member states and GCC countries, or between Brussels and specific Gulf capitals: while these patterns may yield short-term gains, they risk diluting the strategic weight of the EU as a bloc and fragmenting the GCC's collective approach, undermining the potential for a truly multilateral partnership.

⁵⁹ E. Ardemagni, H. Barroug, “EU-GCC: Time Looks Ripe for Security and Defense Cooperation”, *ISPI*, 15 October 2024; it must also be said that the military and security dimension was also a consistent feature of the Abraham Accords, which aimed to build on the momentum of normalisation efforts between Israel and the GCC by fostering military cooperation. However, with the outbreak of the Gaza war and the subsequent cooling of relations between the GCC and Israel, the EU may now have an opportunity to assume a more prominent role in these areas; see A. Ningthoujam, “The military–security dimension of the 2020 Abraham Accords: An Israeli perspective”, *Observer Research Foundation*, 28 July 2022; A. Kateb, “The Abraham Accords After Gaza: A Change of Context”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 April 2025.

⁶⁰ *Coordinated Maritime Presences*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en

⁶¹ *Signature of the Coordination and Cooperation Protocol with Oman*, <https://eunavfor.eu/news/signature-coordination-and-cooperation-protocol-oman>

⁶² O. Mizzi, “Explainer: What is the new GCC 'Vision for Regional Security'?", *The New Arab*, 4 April 2024.

To avoid this drift, the EU must reaffirm its commitment to a bloc-to-bloc architecture that leverages its collective diplomatic and economic power, working to institutionalise policy coordination by, for example, establishing a permanent EU-GCC task force with rotating thematic working groups on trade, energy transition, regional diplomacy, and security, focused on generating actionable outcomes with fixed timelines. Furthermore, flagship initiatives like the 2SS or maritime security coordination must be elevated in formal joint statements and used as models for targeted, high-impact cooperation.

On trade, the EU should resist the temptation to pursue bilateral free trade agreements that sidestep long-standing GCC-wide negotiations. While tailored agreements may seem expedient, they risk weakening the GCC's internal cohesion and diminishing the EU's ability to shape regional economic norms collectively. For this reason, a recalibrated approach, focusing on sector-specific agreements within a broader regional framework, could offer a middle path.

Finally, a credible EU-GCC partnership must reconcile ambition with realism, meaning recognising structural divergences and building pragmatic cooperation around shared interests, namely energy resilience, regional stability, and economic diversification. It also means avoiding empty declarations: the EU must speak with one voice, act with a unified purpose, and treat the GCC not just as a trading partner, but as a strategic political and security actor in its own right. What is needed now is not more dialogue, but the political will to operationalise existing commitments, invest in long-term mechanisms, and treat cooperation as a strategic imperative rather than a reactive option.

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