

HOW THE UKRAINE CRISIS IS REORIENTING GCC FOREIGN POLICIES

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Abstract: As influential regional powers with substantial energy links to the world, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been forced to adapt to an increasingly multipolar world, one where the United States (US) is perceived as facing declining influence vis-a-vis China and Russia. Within the Gulf this could be viewed as the signs of a dying empire, or in the best-case scenario as indicating the unreliability of the US as a security guarantor. GCC states are carrying out an interesting balancing act between their traditional patron, Washington, and their budding ally in Vladimir Putin's Russia. This essay examines how GCC states have adapted to Moscow's expanding influence in the Middle East, how it has provided regional governments an alternative to boost their energy and military partnerships, and whether the Ukraine crisis could prompt a further realignment in the power balance between Moscow and Washington within the Gulf.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has created a number of challenges for countries in the Middle East and North Africa, largely related to the rising prices and scarcity of food and energy. Although most regional countries will face such consumer crises and economic difficulties, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have faced unique obstacles, largely related to balancing their geopolitical aspirations.

As influential regional powers with substantial energy links to the world, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been forced to adapt to an increasingly multipolar world, one where the United States (US) is perceived as facing declining influence vis-a-vis China and Russia. Russia's invasion, and subsequent Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sanctions, have emphasized this move towards multipolarity. This comes as the US has taken an ostensible drawdown from the Middle East. Within the Gulf this could be viewed as the signs of a dying empire, or in the best-case scenario as indicating the unreliability of the US as a security guarantor.

Moreover, ideological shifts within this looming multipolar world have delivered new considerations for the Gulf states, namely China and Russia's tolerance for authoritarianism and apparent anti-democratic nature. This was also seen within the US with the rise of Donald Trump's populism and apparent disregard for human rights, although the Joe Biden administration has been less tolerant of such positions. Furthermore, Russia and China have been seen as more tolerant of human rights abuses while Beijing has been seen as a guarantor of the regional status quo, having presented itself as non-interfering in countries' domestic affairs.

The GCC states have adapted to Moscow's expanding presence based on their own security and geopolitical interests

In the unfolding Ukraine crisis, perhaps the most surprising incident for observers was the UAE's initial position of refusing to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations Security Council,¹ despite being perceived as a traditional US ally in the Middle East. Abu Dhabi later reversed this position and condemned Moscow's actions in line with NATO's stance on Ukraine.

GCC states are carrying out an interesting balancing act between their traditional patron, Washington, and their budding ally in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The GCC states have adapted to Moscow's expanding presence based on their own security and geopolitical interests. Particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, have tried to use Russia's rise to maintain their own influence in the region.

The Ukraine crisis did not beget this apparent shift within the GCC towards Russia and China. Rather, this has been an ongoing trend since the Barack Obama administration through to Donald Trump, though it is now accelerating under President Joe Biden's auspices. Biden already strained relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's leaders after delivering a tougher tone on the human rights abuses of Washington's allies before becoming US President in January 2021. The change in Washington's approach has apparently pushed Riyadh and Abu Dhabi further towards Russia and China, a relationship which has further developed further as the two powers expanded into the Middle East and North Africa. Now, a further conflict of interests between the Gulf capitals and Washington has become more apparent following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

While Qatar has largely benefited from an adaptive role between Moscow and Washington, this brief will examine how GCC states have adapted to Moscow's expanding influence in the Middle East, how it has provided regional governments an alternative to boost their energy and military partnerships, and whether the Ukraine crisis could prompt a further realignment in the power balance between Moscow and Washington within the Gulf.

Developing Relations: Shared Visions of Authoritarian Stability

Russia began to increase its position as a dominant powerbroker in the region after it intervened in September 2015 to support the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria's civil war. Other countries in the region began moving towards Moscow as they realized the opportunity to benefit from its growing regional clout.

Abu Dhabi clearly warmed towards the concept of Moscow providing authoritarian stability within the Middle East and North Africa after it grappled with the prospect of a regionwide revolution with the 2011 Arab uprisings

The UAE took a proactive position following Moscow's intervention, and even welcomed its presence in Syria. The UAE praised Russia's airstrikes on Da'esh militants in Syria as fighting a "common enemy,"² while UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan in December 2015 denounced the downing of a Russian plane by Turkey – Abu Dhabi's rival in the region at the time- as a "terrorist act."³ At the time, Abu Dhabi clearly warmed towards the concept of Moscow providing authoritarian stability within the Middle East and North Africa after it grappled with the prospect of a regionwide revolution with the 2011 Arab uprisings, which it saw as a threat to its own regional vision and security. Given that the US was seen as not providing leadership and effective solutions for the Syrian war, this opened the door for more Russian-Emirati collaboration in Syria.

After the UAE began courting Assad and looking to normalize relations with the isolated leader, including re-opening the Emirati embassy in Damascus in November 2018,⁴ it denounced the Donald Trump-era Caesar Act which entailed sanctions on countries doing business with Assad. Abu Dhabi said the act restricts the chances for peace and re-integrating Damascus into the Arab League.⁵ Indeed, Syria is a key case of how the UAE has felt restricted by the US' traditional influence in the Middle East, yet it also reflects how the UAE can benefit from playing both sides – particularly as it undermined the Caesar Act by building relations with Assad.

While the US has supported the UAE and its military backing enabled Abu Dhabi's intervention in Yemen, where Abu Dhabi seeks to bolster its hegemony over the country's south,⁶ Washington's influence has nonetheless often restricted the gulf nation's geopolitical ambitions. Amid the US' ambivalent policy on Libya under both the Biden and Trump administrations, the UAE appreciated Russia's more assertive influence and aligned itself with Moscow in backing the attempts of warlord Khalifa Haftar to install strongman rule in the country.

Elsewhere, Abu Dhabi tried to support the military in Sudan following the 2019 revolution amidst the power struggle between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and civilian factions.⁷ While the US put pressure on the military to create a transitional power-sharing government with civilian groups,⁸ Russia was more favourable towards military rule, sharing

Abu Dhabi's vision for the country. Sudan's military has since become a dominant actor and even launched a coup against the civilian-backed leaders in October 2021. Russia has played a substantial role in Sudan in courting military figures, and this could enable it to expand its influence in the Horn of Africa. On March 3, Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo (or "Hemedti"), leader of Sudan's Rapid Special Forces, announced that Sudan was receptive to the presence of a Russian naval base in the country.⁹ Sudan, therefore, is an area where the UAE and Russia can cooperate and strengthen ties between the two powers, while also granting Moscow the ability to expand its clout in the Red Sea.

This demonstrates how Abu Dhabi sees it as necessary to maintain Moscow as a partner to advance its aim of empowering autocrats in the Middle East and North Africa. While the UAE has certainly taken a more assertive regional position in recent years while adapting to Russia's expanding presence into the Middle East, Saudi Arabia too has also sought to benefit from Moscow's growing clout. Not only has Saudi Arabia followed the UAE's position of backing autocrats in the Middle East, but Moscow has also poised itself as a more tolerant alternative ally as it faces stigma from Washington. After Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman faced growing scrutiny in the West over the 2018 killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Moscow seemingly warmed towards Riyadh and its new leadership. The famous high-five between Bin Salman and Putin at the 2018 G20 summit in Argentina indicated that Putin, at a time when Bin Salman was being ostracized within Europe and even Washington, was ready to tolerate and create a lasting relationship with the Crown Prince's regime.¹⁰

Riyadh and Moscow's relationship has not been without challenges, however. This can be seen through their disagreements over oil output in March 2020 amid the initial outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.¹¹ Despite these difficulties, Bin Salman has also seen Russia as a potential security guarantor, particularly as military ties with Western countries have not always seemed guaranteed, particularly following the war on Yemen and subsequent scrutiny over Saudi Arabia's actions throughout the conflict. Thus, Riyadh has expressed interest in acquiring military contracts with Moscow, such as for the Russian S-300 air defence systems.¹²

The Biden factor

Joe Biden's presidency in Washington has evidently accelerated the UAE and Saudi Arabia's shift towards Russia, and even China. As mentioned earlier, a key factor was Biden's ostensible wishes to toughen Washington's position on its allies' human rights records. Biden reiterated this position throughout his presidential campaign in 2020 and made Saudi Arabia and the UAE more cautious, particularly as he threatened punitive measures against Bin Salman over the killing of Khashoggi and the Yemen war.¹³

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Saudi Arabia's warmth towards Russia has been somewhat driven by the pressure it has felt from the West. Thus, Biden's presidency has only accelerated this transition further. Since Biden's inauguration as US president in January 2021, some of his moves such as ending some arms sales to Saudi Arabia over the war in Yemen have been seen negatively in Riyadh, which has prompted the Saudi leadership to show it has other options.

In August 2021, Riyadh and Moscow signed a military cooperation agreement at the International Military-Technical Forum Army exposition which was held just outside of Moscow. The agreement "aimed at developing joint military cooperation between the two countries."¹⁴ That year, the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister bin Salman also met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, where both ministers agreed to increase security cooperation between the two countries for the purpose of stability in the Middle East.¹⁵ Riyadh's growing military partnership with Russia in 2021 shows that it is indeed trying to explore various countries and that rather than curtailing Riyadh's military efforts, Biden's stance has prompted the Saudi kingdom to expand its military partnerships elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Washington's catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, which allowed the Taliban to seize power in the country, delivered a further message to US allies that Washington's protection may not always be guaranteed.¹⁶ Along with some other considerations, doubts about Washington's security guarantees to its GCC allies prompted a diplomatic realignment in the Middle East, with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi looking to expand their ties with Russia and China.¹⁷

In a further contrast between the last two US administrations, Trump's reign allowed the UAE and Saudi Arabia to operate more freely and without criticism, consolidating ties between them and Washington. Trump was openly willing to supply weapons to both countries, which enabled their interventions in the Yemen war, while he often turned a blind eye to their actions in various countries like Libya and was also seen as tolerant of human rights concerns within both countries – the latter being particularly true of Saudi Arabia.

Both countries have felt that Biden's leadership is unreliable to support their own foreign policy aims, which has clearly propelled a shift towards China and Russia as a result

The UAE's unease with the Biden administration can also be seen in its unwillingness to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine. Besides from its apparent desires to maintain ties with Moscow, the UAE also felt dejected following Biden's unwillingness to condemn the spill over from the Yemen war when Iranian-backed Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for multiple drone attacks on Abu Dhabi in February. Clearly, both countries have felt that Biden's leadership is unreliable to support their own foreign policy aims, which has clearly propelled a shift towards China and Russia as a result.

Qatar's balancing act

It would be important to consider Qatar's role as the small Gulf country faces similar concerns as its fellow GCC member states. Yet unlike the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Qatar has tried to maintain a more balanced position and has managed to hedge between both the US and Russia. It has done this by largely playing a mediatory and humanitarian role. Moreover, Doha has managed to operate carefully to ensure it does not strain relations with the Biden administration in the same way as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

At the 49th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani stressed the need to uphold international law regarding the conflict and that Doha "assures its respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."¹⁸

Qatar has also adopted a humanitarian stance towards the crisis in Ukraine, after it announced \$5 million in support for Ukrainian refugees while reminding observers of the suffering of Syrian and Palestinian refugees.¹⁹ This further boosted Qatar's image in the eyes of the West. After all, Qatar has tried to pursue a balancing act in previous conflicts such as negotiating between the Taliban and the US prior to Washington's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Further revealing Doha's anti-escalatory stance between Moscow and the West, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Official Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr. Majed bin Mohammed Al Ansari warned against the idea of a multipolar world on a panel in the Doha Forum 2022 entitled "Geopolitical Implications of the Russia-

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Ukraine War on the Middle East" on March 27. Dr. AL Ansari instead urged that diplomacy and dialogue should prevail to prevent the rise in new conflicts.²⁰

In contrast to its other Gulf neighbours, Qatar has supported opposition movements in various countries, those that have aspired for democracy or have had Islamist agendas. This meant it has been forced to adapt carefully to the rise in authoritarianism which the UAE-Saudi-Russian alliance has prompted. Moreover, the challenges that Qatar faced were further clear as the 2017 blockade on Qatar occurred under Trump's auspices, as the former US President initially voiced his support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE's actions.²¹

Clearly, because Qatar relied less on the Trump's administration's tolerance for authoritarian actors, its strong ties with the US were not put in jeopardy when the Biden administration came into power. Moreover, the end of the Gulf crisis after Biden won the November 2020 US Presidential election shows that Qatar can benefit from retaining positive ties with Washington. Given Doha's desires to maintain ties with Russia, it could seek to continue playing a balanced and mediatory role in the Ukrainian conflict.

The Ukraine factor

The international response towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave interesting insight into the loyalties of Gulf states. While the UAE's initial reluctance to denounce Russia's actions at the UNSC showed it wants to maintain ties with Moscow, its subsequent U-turn and eventual condemnation showed that the UAE is still keen to maintain ties with Washington. Moreover, the UAE's U-turn was likely not solely an attempt to appease Washington, but rather an attempt to fall in line with other Western allies, such as Europe, as well.

Yet in a sign of growing friction between Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Washington, both Crown Princes refused to take phone calls with Biden to discuss Washington's wishes to increase oil output.²² This was an interesting shift as both leaders conversely agreed to communicate with Putin. On March 1, Bin Zayed and Putin held a phone call where they discussed coordination over global energy supplies.²³ Then on March 3, Bin Salman called Putin wherein the Russian President "stressed the unacceptability of politicizing global energy supply issues," according to the Kremlin.²⁴

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The pro-authoritarian alignment between Syria and the UAE has also become more relevant amid the Ukraine crisis, with Abu Dhabi further looking to defy Washington's vision in the Middle East and ostensibly side with Moscow. On March 18, Assad visited Abu Dhabi and met Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), and the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. It is significant as it is Assad's first visit to an Arab League state since the Syrian war broke out in 2011,²⁵ highlighting Abu Dhabi's willingness to defy the US as Washington still discourages its allies from doing business with Assad.

While this may prompt a further geopolitical alignment between the UAE and Russia, both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh could once again cooperate further with Moscow over Sudan. Besides the prospect of a Russian naval base, Sudan's military chief and head of Sudan's Sovereign Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan visited Saudi Arabia on March 21, after visiting the UAE. While al-Burhan's visits aimed at securing Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's support for Sudan's flailing economy,²⁶ it also leaves open the possibility of further Emirati-Saudi-Russian support for military rule in Sudan, and thus the wider region.

Economic concerns

While most governments in the wider region have adopted more caution towards the Ukraine crisis, the Gulf states can mostly afford to be more flexible. Although Gulf states have faced food insecurity, they are comparatively less vulnerable towards the economic downfall such as wheat shortages and rising prices compared to other Middle Eastern countries. This is due to their relatively smaller populations and greater income per capita. While the UAE has large supply chains with Russia and Ukraine for wheat, it has large grain storages, meaning it can better handle supply shortages. Saudi Arabia has less of a dependency on wheat from both countries as it only opened its market to Russian wheat in 2020, meaning it has capabilities to explore other supply chains without facing large disruptions.²⁷

Following the broad NATO sanctions on Russia, and the freezing of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Moscow to Berlin, European states began to look for new gas supply chains. Qatar could benefit from this, as it agreed to a deal with Germany to export gas while it has looked to develop its liquified natural gas (LNG) capabilities.²⁸ As Qatar looks to develop its capacity in production and exports by 2025, this could translate into further exports to European

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markets from Qatar in the future. Although it will take time for such a reality to occur, such an outcome would have economic benefits for Doha. Moreover, Qatar's Investment Authority (QIA) currently owns a stake hold in Russian energy giant Rosneft.²⁹ And while other global energy giants have moved away from doing business with Russia in this regard, Qatar has shown that it is both keen to benefit from ties between both Moscow and the West and that it has the flexibility to do so. Clearly, alongside its balancing act between both sides, the Russia-Ukraine war could present economic advantages to Doha should Western states continue to look for new energy sources and move away from Russia.

OPEC+ was another area where Saudi Arabia defied the US. Soon after the Ukraine crisis emerged, Saudi Arabia agreed to respect the previous OPEC+ commitment with Russia on oil output. Nonetheless, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud later stated that oil output should be kept separate from geopolitical circumstances.³⁰ This was a way of showing that Saudi Arabia was keen to uphold energy ties with Russia and not join Western states in imposing punitive measures on Moscow. The oil dimension is indeed relevant as Russia's military operations naturally depend on financing from its energy export revenues. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia announced it would consider selling oil in Chinese Yuan to China, one of the biggest oil consumers in the world, as an alternative to dollars as the primary currency for such transactions.³¹ Evidently, there is clearly shifting sentiment within the Gulf towards how regional countries can react to the challenges and geopolitical implications of the Ukraine conflict.

At the Doha Forum on March 26, Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said that the economic consequences of the Ukraine war could likely drive other countries to pursue new economic agreements for exporting oil. He suggested that because countries were badly affected by the steep rise in oil prices, it could trigger countries to look for new ways to price oil as a hedge against rising prices in the dollar.³²

Future relations

It is important to note that a GCC-Russia alliance may face challenges, as there could be pressure over expanding relations between Moscow and actors like Abu Dhabi. Interestingly, China has tried to ensure it can advance its relations and commercial partnerships within the GCC, per its wider economic expansion into the Middle East and Africa. The US has already

tried to pressure the UAE over its increasing ties with China, such as Abu Dhabi's deals with the Chinese company Huawei, which also put the US-UAE deal for F-35 jets at risk.³³ Yet this has fallen on deaf ears as the UAE has since sought to extend its relations with Beijing

Currently, the United States is still the biggest military power in the Middle East due to its military bases in various countries in the region. Meanwhile, its military ties with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE ensure that Washington can maintain influence in the Bab el-Mandeb and Red Sea to safely control international trade through these two vital shipping passages. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia would also want to continue with US investments in various areas per its Vision 2030, in order to diversify its economy and shift from an oil dependency. It, therefore, needs to tread carefully to ensure Washington's continued support for the economic vision. Qatar so far has been able to balance between the United States and Russia considerably well. Particularly as the Gulf region becomes more united with following the resolution to the GCC crisis, this could act as a model for how Gulf states would tread in an increasingly multipolar world.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE may still tread carefully to avoid damaging ties with the US. After all, it is not so much that Arab Gulf countries are keen to pick sides in Russia and the West. Rather, they are keen to demonstrate their independence, and are not willing to rely exclusively on Washington as they have done in the past particularly due to pressure over their domestic and foreign policies. The Ukraine crisis has especially indicated that Gulf states will be keen to continue to look elsewhere. In the future, this trend could accelerate, particularly should Russia and China continue to increase their own presence in the Middle East and Africa in the future. As individuals within Washington have expressed dissatisfaction towards its Gulf partners' ties with Russia and China, it will be important to keep an eye on how it reacts in the future.

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