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# Exploring Relations between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council: a Structural Analysis

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# **Exploring Relations between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council: a Structural Analysis**

**Matteo Moretti**

On 15 June 1988, the European Council President Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Commissioner Claude Cheysson gathered in Luxembourg with His Royal Highness Prince Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Abdallah Yaccoob Bishara to sign a Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>1</sup> More than 33 years after, it is clear that EU-GCC relations have not reflected the initial expectations. The EU and the GCC held joint councils, meetings, and dialogues for specific areas of cooperation, most notably trade and energy, but the reality is stark: EU-GCC cooperation is at an all-time low and it has been dampened – if not indeed jeopardised – by mutual distrust, lack of coordination, and pressure from lobbies. The Arab spring and crises in the EU's cohesion have worsened the situation.

In this paper, I will seek to explain the absence of a cohesive EU strategy towards the GCC through a diverse theoretical framework. Firstly, by focusing on the structural constraints preventing EU countries from engaging multilaterally with the Gulf countries, I will argue that efforts to implement a cohesive EU policy in the region during the GCC crisis were complicated by the competing interests of EU member states. With this regard, I will use as an example the defence market and the arms sales between the EU and the GCC countries to show how states prefer to engage in bilateral relations than to pursue multilateral policies between the EU and the GCC. Secondly, by focusing on the ideational aspects of EU-GCC relations, I will highlight how normative understandings of the EU's foreign policy identity come into play in EU-GCC relations. Finally, I shall provide some policy recommendations to revive EU-GCC relations.

This paper aims to show how an inclusive framework of theories is necessary to understand the intertwining of material and ideational factors in EU-GCC relations. I will therefore build on the work by Hinnebusch and Ehteshami to argue that a multi-level theoretical framework is needed to understand international politics and, in particular, the multi-faceted relationship between Europe and the GCC. By conducting a structural analysis balancing the realist concern for material factors and a constructivist focus on the identity of both the EU and the GCC, I will explain why the EU's geopolitical presence in the region is weaker than expected and suggest some recommendations to build a more comprehensive European foreign policy vis-à-vis the GCC.

## **An overview of EU-GCC relations**

The existing literature on EU-GCC cooperation reveals a puzzling reality: the 1988 Cooperation Agreement vowed to promote energy, industry, trade, fisheries, agriculture, science, technology, and the environment. Yet, while the EU and the GCC initiated activities in all the areas listed in the agreement, throughout the following decades, EU-GCC cooperation was

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<sup>1</sup>“Treaties Office Database”, Official website of the European Union, last accessed December 31, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/world/agreements/prepareCreateTreatiesWorkspace/treatiesGeneralData.do?step=0&redirect=true&treatyId=232>

largely limited to economics and trade.<sup>2</sup> As far as trade is concerned, the EU has a large trade surplus with the GCC countries which has been growing over the years. In 2020, the EU's trade balance surplus with the GCC countries exceeded €37 billion. During the same year, EU imports from the GCC totalled €29 billion and were constituted mainly by oil, other hydrocarbons, and mining products, while EU exports to the GCC amounted to €67 billion, with GCC countries importing chiefly machinery and transport equipment, agricultural products, and chemicals.<sup>3</sup>

Trade is quite stable thanks to the well-established supply chains that link the two regions.<sup>4</sup> However, the GCC is a less important partner for the EU than the EU is for the GCC.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the EU market size when compared to the GCC, as well as its standing in the field of international trade, contributes to make the Gulf Cooperation Council only a secondary partner for the Union, while the latter was the GCC's second partner for total trade in 2019.<sup>6</sup> This imbalance constitutes a problem for the establishment of a free trade agreement between the EU and the GCC, as the EU has fewer incentives to conclude an FTA with the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Establishing a free trade agreement between the EEC and the GCC was one of the main goals of the 1988 Cooperation Agreement.<sup>7</sup> After exploratory negotiations for a free trade agreement between 1990 and 2003, both blocs were determined to establish a free trade area. In 2003, as the GCC countries established a customs union, proceeding to an FTA became a concrete possibility. However, after the parties held salutary negotiations, in 2008 the GCC definitively halted the FTA talks. Despite the failure to reach an agreement on free trade, the EU and the GCC adopted other initiatives in the field of trade at the interregional level. Economic and trade relations were further enhanced via a series of agreements and memoranda of understanding, the most important of which is the Memorandum of Understanding of 2007 between the Federation of GCC Chambers and EUROCHAMBRES. The MOU set ten objectives, among which were the development of bilateral trade, information exchange, and institutional cooperation.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, the chambers produced a joint statement on EU-GCC free-trade negotiations, emphasising the need for a comprehensive agreement, calling for "increased market access" for industrial goods, services, investment and public procurement; a definition

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<sup>2</sup> Silvia Colombo, Camilla Committeri, "Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation", in *Bridging the Gulf: EU-GCC Relations at a Crossroads*, ed. Silvia Colombo (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014), 20.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission - Directorate General for Trade, "European Union, Trade in goods with GCC 6", p.4. [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/region/details\\_gcc-6\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_gcc-6_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Omar al-Ubaidly, "A Detailed Anatomy of EU-GCC Trade Relations: Past, Present, and Future," Bussola Institute Research Paper no. 10 (2020), 16 <https://www.bussolainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/A-Detailed-Anatomy-of-EU-GCC-Trade-Relations-Past-Present-and-Future.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> M. Anaam Hashmi, Fahad al Eatani, and Fareed Shaikh, "Is There A Need For A Free Trade Agreement Between The European Union And Gulf Cooperation Council?" *International Business & Economics Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (January/February 2014), 115.

<https://doi.org/10.19030/iber.v13i1.8361>

<sup>6</sup> European Commission - Directorate General for Trade, "European Union, Trade in goods with GCC 6", p.8. [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/region/details\\_gcc-6\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_gcc-6_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> COOPERATION AGREEMENT between the European Economic Community, of the one part, and the countries parties to the Charter of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (the State of the United Arab Emirates, the State of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar and the State of Kuwait) of the other part, article 11.

<sup>8</sup> Colombo and Committeri, "Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation", 32.

of rules of origin; support for regional integration; and the establishment of a monitoring committee.”<sup>9</sup>

Regrettably, trade between the GCC and the EU is not sufficiently diversified. Nonetheless, throughout the years, there have been various instruments by which the EU and the GCC cooperated in the fields of trade and finance. In 2016, the European External Action Service reported that, until a little earlier, the Industrialised and High-Income Countries Instrument (ICI) had been used by the EU for financial cooperation with the GCC.<sup>10</sup> The ICI financed, among others, the EU-GCC Trade and Business Cooperation Facility. In May 2017, the EU and the GCC launched the Dialogue on Trade and Investment Issues, which has met three times so far, the first time in Riyadh (2017), the second in Brussels (2018), and the third again in Riyadh, (2020). The dialogue sessions aimed to solve trade issues and enhance investment cooperation between the two sides, with discussions covering tax policies, anti-dumping, standards, and investment priorities. They even tackled cooperation on the development of an FTA.<sup>11</sup> This shows that there is still some interest to reach an agreement. Still, FTA negotiations have remained frozen since 2008. The European Union also funded the EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project, which aims to support the diversification of GCC economies from the hydrocarbon sector and enhance trade between EU and GCC countries. It also publishes bulletins on trade in the two organisations’ member countries and organises events such as the EU-GCC Business Forum.<sup>12</sup>

The question then arises – why did negotiations for a free trade agreement fail? The reasons for the suspension of EU-GCC FTA talks are twofold. Firstly, the EU’s petrochemical lobby waged a fierce opposition campaign against the liberalisation of trade in petrochemical products, causing some EU member countries to restrict duty-free access for petrochemicals from the GCC.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the resilience of bilateral relations between the single EU and GCC countries has hindered progress in the negotiations. Some European countries have longstanding ties with GCC countries, which date back to the colonial period.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the explosion of intra-GCC tensions with the rift between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on the one hand, and Qatar on the other hindered any possibility for the GCC to engage in negotiations for an FTA once again. As for the European Union, after EU-GCC ties had largely come to a halt, it decided to strike bilateral cooperation agreements with the single countries of the GCC.<sup>15</sup>

Outside of trade issues, there exists cooperation in the fields of energy and the environment. Kick-started in the early 1990s with the Energy Experts group, EU-GCC energy cooperation

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<sup>9</sup> EUROCHAMBRES, “EU-GCC Business Statement on EU-GCC Free Trade Relations,” 29 October 2008, <http://www.eurochambres.eu/Content/Default.asp?PageID=1&DocID=1357>, quoted in Colombo, Committeri, “Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation”, 32.

<sup>10</sup> “Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the EU”, The European External Action Service, May 2, 2016, last accessed on November 2, 2020. [https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/338/gulf-cooperation-council-gcc-and-eu\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/338/gulf-cooperation-council-gcc-and-eu_en)

<sup>11</sup> “UAE participates in first trade and investment dialogue between GCC and European Union”, in *International Finance*, May 22, 2017, last accessed November 2, 2020.

<https://internationalfinance.com/uae-participates-first-trade-investment-dialogue-gcc-european-union/>

<sup>12</sup> The European External Action Service, “EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project,” October 30, 2020. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/87855/eu-gcc-dialogue-economic-diversification-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/87855/eu-gcc-dialogue-economic-diversification-project_en)

<sup>13</sup> Silvia Colombo, “EU-GCC Relations and the risk of irrelevance,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2017), 65. [http://turkishpolicy.com/files/articlepdf/eu-gcc-relations-and-the-risk-of-irrelevance\\_en\\_2722.pdf](http://turkishpolicy.com/files/articlepdf/eu-gcc-relations-and-the-risk-of-irrelevance_en_2722.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Koch, “After Al-Ula: Implications for GCC-EU relations,” *Manara magazine*, March 16, 2021. <https://manaramagazine.org/2021/03/16/after-al-ula-implications-for-gcc-eu-relations/>



was facilitated by the complementarity of the European consumption patterns and GCC production of hydrocarbons.<sup>16</sup> However, things are changing rapidly in the energy sector at the global level: consuming patterns in the EU are changing, the GCC countries are timidly trying to diversify their energy production sources and, most importantly, climate change is looming large. In this context, GCC states are realising that the era of abundant supplies of hydrocarbons to maintain their economies is passing.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, GCC countries are confronted to the increased role of China and to its ever-growing demand for energy. In the meantime, the EU and the GCC are cooperating on clean energy production.

The “EU-GCC clean energy network”, which started its activities in 2010, now has five working areas: renewable energy sources; energy efficiency and demand-side management; clean gas and related technologies, including hydrogen; electricity interconnections and market integration; carbon capture and storage. It added that climate change aspects would be considered across all of the five topics.<sup>18</sup> However, several problems lie ahead for EU-GCC cooperation in the fields of energy and the environment. Firstly, GCC countries are essentially still rentier states. Secondly, they often lack basic items such as local content in solar panels, solar panel manufacturing plants and technologies, and public and private initiatives for solar energy development.”<sup>19</sup> Thirdly, while the EU has adopted several policies for cleaner energy and even approved the European Green Deal, the GCC lacks a common energy policy.<sup>20</sup>

The EU and the GCC also cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Literature on joint EU-GCC workshops on combating terrorism financing is scarce but these have taken place: typically, during these workshops, the parties reviewed risk assessments on the fight against terrorism and discussed ways to reduce terrorist financing.<sup>21</sup> The EU and the GCC are also involved in the fight against piracy. The parties first discussed the issue of piracy in 2008, during a Joint Council, when they condemned all acts of piracy off the coasts of Somalia and “commended efforts by the international community and states, including the EU, to protect ships and vessels off the coasts of Somalia.”<sup>22</sup> However, the EU cooperates more with the single countries than with the GCC as a whole: cooperation in this matter continues especially with Oman, with which the EU carried out a joint naval exercise in the Arabian Sea in October 2021.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the backmarker of EU-GCC cooperation is culture, research, and technology. Cooperation in these fields has been so far scarce: indeed, while the Joint Action Plan for 2010-2013 did provide models for cooperation in scientific research and technology, the language it

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<sup>16</sup> Abdulaziz Al-Shalabi, Nicolas Cottret, Emanuela Menichetti, “EU-GCC Cooperation on Energy”, in *Bridging the Gulf: EU–GCC Relations at a Crossroads*, ed. Silvia Colombo (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2014), 157.

<sup>17</sup> Angus Taverner, “Covid-19, Oil Price Contraction and Energy Transition: Implications for the GCC States and Europe,” *The Bussola Institute – Research Paper 2* (2021), 23. <https://www.bussolainstitute.org/news/covid-19-oil-price-contraction-and-energy-transition-implications-for-the-gcc-states-and-europe/>

<sup>18</sup> EU-GCC Clean-Energy Technology Network, “About,” last accessed on April 23, 2021. <https://www.eugcc-cleanenergy.net/aboutnetwork>

<sup>19</sup> Hassan Yahyazadeh, “Renewable Energy Communities in the Law of EU, GCC Countries, and Iran”, *Journal of Fundamentals of Renewable Energy and Applications* 10, no. 6 (2020). doi: 10.4172/2090-4541.1000279

<sup>20</sup> Rafael Leal-Arcas, *EU Energy and Law and Policy* (Chişinău: Eliva Press, 2020), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Government of Bahrain, “Ministry of Foreign Affairs Achievements in 2015,” last accessed April 17, 2021. [https://www.mofa.gov.bh/Portals/0/pdf/AnnualReport2015\\_En.pdf](https://www.mofa.gov.bh/Portals/0/pdf/AnnualReport2015_En.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The European External Action Service, “Maritime security: EU and Oman carry out joint naval exercise,” October 20, 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/105894/maritime-security-eu-and-oman-carry-out-joint-naval-exercise\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/105894/maritime-security-eu-and-oman-carry-out-joint-naval-exercise_en)

used was non-committal and did not attribute clear responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, this lack of progress reflects the structural challenges to EU-GCC relations: between 2010 and 2012, a project called INCONET-GCC, aiming to support interregional dialogue and promote synergy on science and technology programmes, was launched.<sup>25</sup> However, no other projects have followed in these areas at the interregional level, and progress in the field of higher education has also been slow.<sup>26</sup> Finally, while there has been some progress in archaeological expeditions, cultural exchange, and exhibitions, these are often modelled on the pre-existing bilateral relationship between EU and GCC countries, as exemplified by the French-Emirati cooperation and the opening, in 2017, of a new branch of the Louvre museum in the UAE.<sup>27</sup> Cooperation in the field of culture demonstrates once again the predominance of bilateral EU-GCC relations.

In the last analysis, relations between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council are not as strong as they could be and need to be revamped. In contrast to expectations for the establishment of a close relationship, which have failed to materialise, Konstadinova pointed out that the developments in EU-GCC interactions – albeit positive ones, such as the negotiations for an FTA among the GCC countries that would pave the way for closer region-to-region cooperation – have “ambiguous future prospects.”<sup>28</sup> More recent literature highlights that the framework of EU-GCC multilateral relations is not particularly encouraging, especially after the failure to renovate the EU-GCC Joint Action Plan in 2013. Indeed, competition between GCC countries on the one hand, and centrifugal forces within Europe, on the other hand, exacerbated competition among EU countries to secure advantageous bilateral ties with the GCC countries.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, European countries have been increasingly marginalised as relevant actors in the Gulf. On the other hand, GCC countries have become increasingly prominent actors in the Mediterranean and vis-à-vis their European partners, with their investments in various EU countries after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.<sup>30</sup> This discouraging vision of EU-GCC multilateral relations is shared by Abdel Ghaffar and Colombo, who highlight how poor regional integration within the GCC has created the conditions for bilateral relations with EU countries mainly based on colonial ties and security cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

## A comprehensive theoretical framework

Previous research on relations between the EU and the GCC shows that their member states tend to engage in bilateral relations rather than in multilateral ones. The available neorealist scholarship has individuated in anarchy and self-help the causes of such lack of multilateralism,

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Al-Mukhaini, “EU–GCC Cooperation in the Fields of Higher Education and Scientific Research: The Way Forward,” in *Bridging the Gulf: EU–GCC Relations at a Crossroads*, ed. Silvia Colombo (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2014), 260.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, “Science and Technology International Cooperation Network for Gulf Cooperation Countries aiming at the promotion of bi-regional dialogue,” 2.  
<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/244401/reporting/fr>

<sup>26</sup> Al-Mukhaini, “EU–GCC Cooperation in the Fields of Higher Education and Scientific Research,” 252.

<sup>27</sup> Valérie Astruc, “Interview exclusive d’Emmanuel Macron: “Le Louvre Abou Dhabi est un rempart contre l’obscurantisme,” *FranceInfo*, last modified November 9, 2017.

[https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/musique/jazz/interview-exclusive-d-039-emmanuel-macron-quot-le-louvre-abou-dhabi-est-un-rempart-contre-l-039-obscurantismequot\\_3338539.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/musique/jazz/interview-exclusive-d-039-emmanuel-macron-quot-le-louvre-abou-dhabi-est-un-rempart-contre-l-039-obscurantismequot_3338539.html)

<sup>28</sup> Valentina Kostadinova, “What is the Status of the EU-GCC Relationship?”, in *GRC Gulf Papers* (Gulf Research Center, 2013), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Silvia Colombo, “Italia e Arabia Saudita: non solo per soldi,” *Limes* 3, (March 2017), 197.

<sup>30</sup> Cinzia Bianco, *A Gulf Apart: How Europe Can Gain Influence with The Gulf Cooperation Council - Policy Brief*, (The European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2020) 6.

<sup>31</sup> Adel Abdel Ghafar, Silvia Colombo, *EU-GCC Relations: The Path towards a New Relationship*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, March 2, 2020, 2.

yet constructivist research puts anarchy in relation with the understanding that EU and GCC states have of it and on their identities. Neorealists, on one hand, overlook the ideational factors at play in international politics. Constructivists, on the other hand, supply a universal theory that takes account of area-specific identity but understates the weight of material factors stressed by realism. Therefore, explaining the foreign and security policy of such complex and multifaceted actors like the EU entails utilising an analytical framework that draws from a plurality of different theoretical approaches.<sup>32</sup> The same applies to the GCC, whose role in international politics can be assessed only by using an inclusive theoretical framework combining realism and constructivism.<sup>33</sup> Many scholars have proposed the names of “Realist constructivism” and “complex realism” – the latter is to be attributed to Hinnebusch and Ehteshami – to exemplify the need for a mixed approach.<sup>34</sup> Such an approach should supplement a realist explanation with geopolitical and domestic-level considerations.<sup>35</sup>

### **A matter of anarchy: structural constraints to the EU policy vis-à-vis the GCC**

Determining why multilateralism does not pick up in EU-GCC relations is challenging: the states constituting these two regional organisations seem to operate in a confusing, fluid environment. Neorealism and constructivism offer a useful concept to assess the fluidity of such an environment: anarchy. Indeed, the confusing environment to which I refer is the anarchical structure of international relations. It is the environment where states operate and strike deals that influences their operations and dealings. Waltz defined anarchy as “the absence of government” and associated it with the occurrence of violence.<sup>36</sup> Since threats abound in an anarchic order, states are concerned with security, which is seen as “the highest end.”<sup>37</sup> What states might want to do in the absence of structural constraints is very different from what they eventually do because, in a self-help system, security considerations subordinate economic gains to political interest and states are not willing to jeopardise security.<sup>38</sup> This is particularly helpful to understand why EU member states are reluctant to adopt a common policy encompassing trade and other areas of cooperation in the GCC: EU countries do not fear aggression from each other anymore, but they still compete in the economic realm, as their foreign policies in the Middle East exemplify.

Over the last years, EU influence in the Middle East is growing weaker, with national foreign policies largely focused on short-term gains.<sup>39</sup> EU member states have contrasting points of view when it comes to the Middle East and, when tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean broke

<sup>32</sup> Adrian Hyde-Price, “Interests, institutions and identities in the study of European foreign policy,” in *Rethinking European Union Foreign Policy*, ed. Ben Tonra, Tomas Christiansen (Manchester University Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>33</sup> Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu, “Alliances and Regionalism in the Middle East After Arab Uprisings: An Assessment of the Durability and Fragility of the Gulf Cooperation Council,” in *Gulf Cooperation Council Culture and Identities in the New Millennium: Resilience, Transformation, (Re)Creation, and Diffusion*, ed. Magdalena Karolak, 19.

<sup>34</sup> See Samuel J. Barkin, “Realist Constructivism,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 3 (September 2003), 338-339 and Hinnebusch and Ehteshami ed., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism,” in Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 240.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Berkeley: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 102.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì, “Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy,” *IAI Papers* 20, no. 37 (November 2020), 10.

<https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/collective-security-and-multilateral-engagement-middle-east-pathways-eu-policy>



out in 2020, divisions among European countries were plain to see: the EU was not able to provide a cohesive response to the provocations made by Turkey. This paved the way for France to take on a more assertive role in defence of Greece and Cyprus, while Italy and Germany have opted for a lower profile and timidly tried to mediate.<sup>40</sup> In Libya, contrasts are even starker: on the one hand, most European countries ostensibly supported the UN-mediated peace process and recognised as legitimate the government led by Fayeze al-Serraj. On the other hand, Germany sold arms to both warring parties in the Libyan civil war, and France was even accused of tacitly supporting Khalifa Haftar's forces.<sup>41</sup> Finally, when it comes to the GCC, competing interests among EU member states regarding trade opportunities and arms sales are complicating efforts to craft an EU-wide policy in the region.<sup>42</sup>

Commercial and political interests causing EU member states to refrain from adopting a coordinated EU foreign policy vis-à-vis the GCC deserve further discussion to highlight the role of anarchy. The GCC crisis of 2017 is a perfect example: shortly after Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt severed their diplomatic ties with Qatar and banned Qatari planes and ships from using their airspaces and waters, the EU foreign ministers expressed their "full support for the mediation efforts of Kuwait."<sup>43</sup> However, despite their heavy presence in the GCC at the economic (e.g., with German and French companies) and military level (e.g., with the British naval base in Bahrain and the French airbase in Abu Dhabi), EU member states did not play a significant role in the evolution of the crisis.<sup>44</sup> Efforts to design and implement a cohesive EU response to the GCC crisis were complicated by the competing interests of EU member states.<sup>45</sup>

### The example of the defence market

As said above, some EU countries have long-standing bilateral relationships with GCC countries that often date back to the colonial era. The most evident of these ties is the one that the UK has with the smaller members of the Council, for which the British were a key actor during the struggle for independence.<sup>46</sup> But there are other examples from a more recent period: France is currently the second European country to have a permanent base on the soil of a GCC country. The French base of al-Dhafra (Abu Dhabi) was created in 2008 under an intergovernmental agreement between France and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>47</sup> France's strong defence relationship with the UAE has also been cemented by intense ties in the military industry, as the latest developments show: in December 2021, the UAE purchased 80 *Rafale* fighter jets as well as 12 military helicopters from France.<sup>48</sup> The UAE are not the only GCC

<sup>40</sup> Silvia Colombo, "La matassa del Mediterraneo orientale e il ruolo dell'Italia," *Osservatorio ISPI-IAI sulla politica estera italiana* 12, October 15, 2020.

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-matassa-del-mediterraneo-orientale-e-il-ruolo-dellitalia-27848>

<sup>41</sup> Anchal Vohra, "The Arab Spring Changed Everything — in Europe," *Foreign Policy*, December 24, 2020.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/24/the-arab-spring-changed-everything-in-europe/>

<sup>42</sup> Colombo and Dessì, "Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East," 10.

<sup>43</sup> Council of the European Union. "Foreign Affairs Council," June 19, 2017. Last reviewed April 29, 2019.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2017/06/19/>

<sup>44</sup> Máté Szalai, *The Crisis of the GCC and the role of the European Union*, 2018, Menara Future Notes, n. 14, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Colombo and Dessì, "Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East," 10.

<sup>46</sup> W. Taylor Fain, "Britain's Presence in the Persian Gulf, 1617-2019," in *The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 328.

<sup>47</sup> Ministère des Armées, "FFEAU, Alindien" last modified September 20, 2016.

<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/forces-de-presence/emirats-arabes-unis/dossier/ffeau-alindien>

<sup>48</sup> John Irish, "Cementing ties with France, UAE places \$19 bln order for warplanes, helicopters," *Reuters*, December 3, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/frances-macron-nears-uae-rafale-fighter-jet-deal-2021-12-03/>

country to possess the French Rafale: Qatar does also have 36 of such French multi-purpose fighter jets.<sup>49</sup> In the last decades, many EU countries like France, Germany, Italy, and the UK did not want to jeopardise their commercial relations with the GCC states – most notably Saudi Arabia – to which they sell arms.<sup>50</sup> The reluctance of EU countries to engage in multilateral policies vis-à-vis the GCC was also evident in 2005 when Angela Merkel visited the region as the President of the European Council and emphasised opportunities for Germany to expand its ties with the region.<sup>51</sup>

Because the EU lacks the authority to bind its member states to implement a common policy, efforts of this kind are left to the goodwill of states. The “absence of government” that Waltz referred to as anarchy makes the European Union weaker in the foreign policy realm: unless all of its member states are willing to act together, the EEAS and the Commission are not entitled to act. The central institution to decide on matters of CFSP is the Council.<sup>52</sup> Under Article 218 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Council is the sole EU body to be able to authorise the opening of negotiations and the signing of agreements and to conclude them.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, on matters of CFSP, the Council votes unanimously. This makes it subject to the veto power of member states. Only when all states agree can the EEAS implement policies. EU member states still act without a supranational authority above them in the realm of foreign policy, in a *de facto* situation of anarchy.

As a result, the EEAS has been slow in the diplomatic field vis-à-vis the GCC: the EU Delegation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was only established in 2004 and handled all EU affairs in the region. It was not until 2013, with the opening of the Delegation to the United Arab Emirates, and in 2019, with the opening of a new EU delegation in Kuwait City, that other regional offices were added.<sup>54</sup> In 2021, following the visit of Josep Borrell to Qatar, the opening of a new delegation office in Doha was announced for 2022.<sup>55</sup> Still, the EEAS enjoys no power to push member states to adopt a common policy vis-à-vis the GCC. Member states, for their part, see the GCC countries as their clients and are not willing to compromise their special relations with them. Finally, even when it comes to European diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran, European powers seem to prioritise balancing acts in the Gulf as well as with the United States.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Al-Jazeera, “Qatar takes delivery of first French-built Rafale jet fighter,” 6 February 2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/6/qatar-takes-delivery-of-first-french-built-rafale-jet-fighter>

<sup>50</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe’s Uncertain Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics,” *IAI Commentaries* 18, no. 28 (May 2018), 2. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/between-rock-and-hard-place-europes-uncertain-role-middle-eastern-geopolitics>

<sup>51</sup> Abdulla Baabood, “Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States’ Foreign Policy, with Special Reference to the EU,” *The Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 263.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Schütze, *An Introduction to European Union Law – Second Edition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 56.

<sup>53</sup> European Union, “Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - PART FIVE: EXTERNAL ACTION BY THE UNION - TITLE IV: RESTRICTIVE MEASURES - Article 218 (ex-Article 300 TEC),” *Official Journal of the European Union* 115, May 9, 2008, 144–46. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E218>

<sup>54</sup> European External Action Service, “European Union opens a new Delegation in Kuwait City,” July 14, 2019. Last accessed January 18, 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/65425/european-union-opens-new-delegation-kuwait-city\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/65425/european-union-opens-new-delegation-kuwait-city_en)

<sup>55</sup> Asmahan Qarjoui, “EU to open mission in Doha next year: official,” *Doha News*, 30 September 2021. <https://www.dohanews.co/eu-to-open-mission-in-doha-next-year-official/>

<sup>56</sup> Emma Soubrier, “The European Response to the Saudi Attacks: A Careful Balancing Act,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 30, 2019. <https://agsiw.org/the-european-response-to-the-saudi-attacks-a-careful-balancing-act/>

Similarly, at the GCC level, self-help behaviours and an enduring preference for bilateralism have consistently undermined efforts to align foreign policy-making in the realms of security, defence, and trade: despite the 1988 Cooperation Agreement and the ongoing negotiations for the FTA, in the 1990s GCC member states entertained bilateral trade and defence relationships with EU member states just as they did with the US.<sup>57</sup> On many occasions in the GCC's history, "narrow national interests prevailed over collective interests."<sup>58</sup> This happened recently when, on December 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched a "joint cooperation committee" to consolidate the KSA–UAE axis and suggested that the GCC was not functional anymore.<sup>59</sup> The reluctance in the GCC countries to cooperate on the multilateral level is reflected in trade with the EU: for example, when it comes to the failure of interregional dialogue with the EU, Saudi Arabia was the country that pushed most for the petrochemical issue, whereas the other five member states did not have the same interest.<sup>60</sup>

### **Constructivist explanations: the European foreign policy identity at play in the GCC**

While the scholars mentioned above have offered sound analyses drawing from neorealist theories to explain balancing behaviours in EU–GCC relations, the realist paradigm fails to account for some aspects. Firstly, as Waltz himself points out, neorealism "can tell us what pressures are exerted and what possibilities are posed by systems change, but it cannot tell us just how, and how effectively, the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities."<sup>61</sup> Secondly, just as neoliberalism, neorealism has a behavioural conception of process and institutions: neorealist scholars overlook the role of process (intended as "learning" and "interaction" among states) and institutions (including international organisations such as the EU and the GCC) by arguing that they change behaviours but not identities and interests.<sup>62</sup> Thirdly – and most importantly – neorealists overlook the ideational aspects of international relations.<sup>63</sup> Constructivists like Alexander Wendt refute Waltz's thesis and argue that "anarchy is what states make of it."<sup>64</sup> They contend that, by championing the absolute primacy of hard power and neglecting the importance of identities, neorealists fail to account for the intersubjective understandings that help shape international relations. As Gause rightly stressed, structure alone is not enough to answer questions on the behaviour of states in the Gulf.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, to compensate for this shortfall in the neorealist paradigm, a sound analysis of EU–GCC relations must put the concept of anarchy in relation to identities. In Wendt's theory of International Relations, the structure of international relations is composed of both material and ideational elements. This entails that any analysis that claims to be *structural* cannot prescind from ideational factors, which are as valid as material factors. If the primacy of material factors

<sup>57</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "GCC Foreign Policy: the Struggle for Consensus," in *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*, ed. Shahram Akhbarzadeh (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 215.

<sup>58</sup> Baabood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy," 269.

<sup>59</sup> Simeon Kerr, "Saudi Arabia and UAE launch new economic and military alliance," *Financial Times*, December 5, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/e0e6ce2b-c5aa-3b56-a7cd-9e4e0b619909>

<sup>60</sup> Baabood, "Dynamics and Determinants of the GCC States' Foreign Policy," 274.

<sup>61</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 392. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858>

<sup>63</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Explaining International Politics in the Middle East: The Struggle of Regional Identity and Systemic Structure," in *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, ed. Gerd Nonneman (Abingdon: Routledge 2005), 243.

<sup>64</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it".

<sup>65</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

wanes, then anarchy acquires a whole new meaning, for it depends on what states make of it.<sup>66</sup> States in a group – be it the EU or the GCC – tend to perceive each other as friends, allies, rivals, and even enemies depending on their identities, but these are dependent on external factors, too. Therefore, whether European states will choose to compete among themselves for bilateral relations with the Arab states of the Gulf (and vice versa) by adopting self-help and egoistic policies is also contingent upon their identities.

Over time, the European Union has developed an international identity that is characterised by pacific purposes, core principles identified by certain norms that are central to the EU, and a policymaking process that favours slow and structural approaches based on consensus rather than rapid actions.<sup>67</sup> Since the EU is still evolving constantly in its institutions and practices, its identity is inevitably fluid when compared to the identity of states.<sup>68</sup> Most importantly, the EU's role emerged over the last decades as that of a “civilian or normative power,” which is not just part of the EU's grand strategy but also a reflexive attempt at identity creation through foreign policy.<sup>69</sup> Yet the identity of “normative power Europe” does not come without consequences on the EU's foreign policy in the GCC.

The most evident impact of the EU's foreign policy identity on Europe's relation with the GCC countries is the role of human rights. The EU generally seeks to promote the values of human rights at the global level through conditionality in its agreements with foreign partners but also by holding human rights dialogues with them.<sup>70</sup> When it comes to the GCC's point of view vis-à-vis the EU's stance on human rights, the Gulf countries believe the EU contradicted itself by criticising human rights violations and seeking to conclude economic agreements.<sup>71</sup> And, most importantly, even during talks for an FTA, there were moments when GCC countries saw this as a deliberate attempt by the EU to interfere with their domestic politics.<sup>72</sup> However, GCC countries were not contrary to human rights clauses in principle and today many GCC countries hold human rights dialogues with the EU - Saudi Arabia being the latest to have begun doing so.<sup>73</sup> In this context, the EU is balancing its normative foreign policy identity against its more down-to-earth material interests.

## **Conclusions: current trends and recommendations for EU-GCC relations**

At the beginning of 2021, the situation in the Gulf Cooperation Council started moving towards easing intra-GCC tensions: on January 5, 2021, the rulers of all Gulf Cooperation Council's countries gathered in al-Ula for the 41<sup>st</sup> GCC summit, which provided a glimmer of hope for a

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>67</sup> Ian Manners and Richard Whitman, “The ‘difference engine’: constructing and representing the international identity of the European Union,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 10, no. 3 (June 2003), 399. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350176032000085360>

<sup>68</sup> Charlotte Bretherton, John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 35.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Risse, “Identity Matters: Exploring the Ambivalence of EU Foreign Policy,” *Global Policy* 3, no. 1 (December 2012), 91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12019>

<sup>70</sup> Fabienne Zwagemakers, “The EU's Conditionality Policy: A New Strategy to Achieve Compliance,” *IAI Working Papers* 12, no. 3 (January 2012). <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1203.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> Cinzia Bianco, “Gulf of Difference: How Europe can get the Gulf Monarchies to pursue Peace with Iran,” *Policy Brief*, The European Council on Foreign Relations, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Colombo, “EU-GCC Relations and the risk of irrelevance,” 65.

<sup>73</sup> The European External Action Service, “Saudi Arabia: First Human Rights Dialogue with the EU,” 28 September 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104744/saudi-arabia-first-human-rights-dialogue-eu\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104744/saudi-arabia-first-human-rights-dialogue-eu_en).



more united GCC in the future.<sup>74</sup> At the summit, after greeting Qatar's ruling emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani with an embrace, Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman announced the restoration of full ties with Qatar and the lifting of the embargo against it.<sup>75</sup> As Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – whose officials were also present at the summit – ended the embargo, the GCC signed the “al-Ula Declaration,” whereby they agreed to strengthen cooperation and to complete “requirements for the Customs Union and the Common Gulf Market.”<sup>76</sup> These developments were favoured by the mediation of Kuwait and the US. The summit of al-Ula was followed in December by the 42<sup>th</sup> GCC summit in Riyadh, where leaders of the Gulf countries met again. Yet, determining whether such unity will last is a different matter. Even as the breakthroughs from the al-Ula summit onwards hint at a period of intra-GCC stability for the months and possibly years to come, it remains unclear to what degree al-Ula has led to renewed commitment by member states to the GCC. As a consequence, it is also unclear whether the EU can seize this opportunity to revive its interregional cooperation with the GCC.

On January 6, 2021, Josep Borrell commented the positive developments unfolding at the Al-Ula summit and declared that “the EU stands ready to support further regional integration within the Gulf Cooperation Council and to strengthen its long-standing partnership with the GCC.”<sup>77</sup> EEAS Spokesperson Peter Stano echoed Borrell's words in February when he stated that the EU is open to engagement with the GCC to boost trade ties.<sup>78</sup> While it is not difficult to imagine that the two parties will try to put negotiations for an FTA back on track, it remains unclear whether they will eventually move forward. The Arab countries of the Gulf are facing a structural challenge hindering the potential for restoring GCC unity and multilateral cooperation with the EU: in the absence of a higher authority, none of them has the power to coerce the others to accept their will. GCC countries are still wary of each other and may decide not to get back to pre-2017 levels of cooperation. Besides, progress on the establishment of an EU-GCC free trade agreement is tied to the nodes of human rights clauses, petrochemical market issues, and the reluctance of some EU and GCC countries to sacrifice their special relations at the bilateral level.

Against this backdrop, EU policymakers can do little to promote the return of a cooperative environment in the Gulf Cooperation Council. What they may do is strengthen their geopolitical role in the region, with a strategy that might overcome internal competition and help shape a more pragmatic role for the EU in the Gulf. Such a positive role was indeed played by Europe as EEAS Deputy Secretary-General chaired the talks in Vienna, aimed at bringing the United States back into the JCPOA with Iran.<sup>79</sup> These developments support the view that acting collectively at the European level holds the best prospect for the EEAS officials to persuade

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<sup>74</sup> Tuqa Khalid, “Full transcript of al-Ula GCC Summit Declaration: Bolstering Gulf unity,” *al-Arabiya News*, January 6, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/01/06/Full-transcript-of-AlUla-GCC-Summit-Declaration-Bolstering-Gulf-unity>.

<sup>75</sup> France 24, “Saudi Arabia says full ties restored between Qatar and embargo nations,” January 5, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210105-qatar-saudi-leaders-hug-end-embargo-bitter-rivals>

<sup>76</sup> Tuqa, “Full transcript of al-Ula GCC Summit Declaration: Bolstering Gulf unity.”

<sup>77</sup> The European External Action Service, “GCC: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the normalisation of relations among Gulf countries,” January 6, 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/91184/gcc-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-normalisation-relations-among-gulf-countries\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/91184/gcc-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-normalisation-relations-among-gulf-countries_en)

<sup>78</sup> “EU trade chief is open for engagement with GCC to boost trade ties,” YouTube video, 1:03, “EU Debates | eudebates.tv,” February 18, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdoASOPcWuw>

<sup>79</sup> Katy Dartford, “Iran cautiously optimistic about progress of nuclear deal talks in Vienna,” *Euronews*, last updated April 18, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/18/iran-cautiously-optimistic-about-progress-of-nuclear-deal-talks-in-vienna>



third parties that the EU is relevant in the international arena.<sup>80</sup> With this regard, Josep Borrell's trip to Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia provided interesting cues on the EU's foreign policy in the Gulf. When meeting with GCC leaders, the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy tackled the EU's commitment to becoming a major market for renewable energy, cooperating with Gulf countries in the field of water security, cooperating in "soft security" areas such as maritime safety, and continuing human rights dialogues.<sup>81</sup>

In the last analysis, the EU's dilemma boils down a trade-off between a normative posture at the international level (whereby the European identity and values are put at the first place) and pursuing more down-to-earth interests. In other words, such a trade-off entails the need for the EU to balance out normative and trade interests. On the one hand, the EU's focus on normative principles poorly fits with governance structures in the Gulf.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, by making concessions on human rights issues the EU would contradict its very basic principles enshrined in the treaties, such as the respect for human rights and the rule of law. To solve this conundrum, the EU should take a more open approach that goes beyond the self-referential questions on its foreign policy identity. So far, the Union has taken both ways and continued human rights dialogues while still engaging in trade with the GCC.

Moreover, when it comes to trade and investments, some recommendations can be made to the GCC as well. Investment reports published by the EU show that the GCC countries need to attract more foreign direct investments from Europe. Indeed, while reforms to diversify their economies away from the hydrocarbon sector have succeeded in substantially increasing FDIs only in the UAE, the other GCC members should implement bolder policies of reform, lest EU companies will grow uncertain about the direction for FDI reform agendas in the GCC.<sup>83</sup> EU companies often have more practical interests, such as "collecting payments, obtaining certificates, adhering to product standards and qualified labour."<sup>84</sup> Against this backdrop, the GCC could provide a roadmap for its member countries to adopt reforms that tackle diversification from hydrocarbons and common standards on the practicalities mentioned above to advance together and better meet the standards of EU companies.

Still, despite the importance of concluding a free trade agreement the EU and the GCC should not put too much emphasis on the conclusion of a free trade agreement. Rather, should time not be ripe for advancements in FTA talks, they could just seek other ways to enhance cooperation. Indeed, while an FTA between the two regions would undoubtedly benefit cooperation, difficulties in the process of EU economic and political integrations, as well as divisions in the GCC, may hinder the conclusion of such an agreement.<sup>85</sup> Bearing this in mind, policymakers should pay attention not to make relations between the two blocs overly dependent on the conclusion of a free trade agreement. They could instead focus on sectoral agreements: since there is much need for cooperation at the EU-GCC level in the fields of counterterrorism and

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<sup>80</sup> Geoffrey Edwards, "The EU's foreign policy and the search for effect," *International Relations* 27, n. 3, 287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117813497304>

<sup>81</sup> The European External Action Service, "The EU's stakes and options in a changing Gulf region," 30 September 2021. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104951/eu%E2%80%99s-stakes-and-options-changing-gulf-region\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104951/eu%E2%80%99s-stakes-and-options-changing-gulf-region_en)

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Demmelhuber and Christian Kaunert, "The EU and the Gulf monarchies: normative power Europe in search of a strategy for engagement," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (April 2014), 576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.855168>

<sup>83</sup> Eurosupport Consortium – AESA, "2017 EU - Gulf Cooperation Council Investment Report," 95. [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/april/tradoc\\_156661.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/april/tradoc_156661.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Colombo and Committeri, "Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation", in *Bridging the Gulf: EU-GCC Relations at a Crossroads*, ed. Silvia Colombo (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014), 44.

maritime security, they could start by increasing cooperation in these fields. The EU could cooperate with the GCC in areas that would ultimately favour intra-GCC integration and especially in soft security and education, by fostering people-to-people exchange and the development of technical research.

Of all the international organisations with a regional dimension, the European Union is arguably the most experienced in integration and institution-building.<sup>86</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council, in contrast, has been struggling to achieve closer political, monetary, and security integration among its member states.<sup>87</sup> The EU could use its experience in regional integration to help the GCC integrate further. Some efforts have already been made in this direction during the Joint Councils and Ministerial Meetings held until 2017 when the GCC crisis provoked their interruptions. Finally, when it comes to security, the EU could focus on other priorities such as restoring security in the Gulf region and helping increase confidence-building measures between the GCC and other regional actors such as Iran.

Since the US are diminishing their presence in the Middle East, the EU could step in to provide security arrangement for the GCC states. In particular, it should increase its engagement in maritime security missions like the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) and support confidence-building measures in the Gulf region. These efforts could pave the way to multilateral talks on security issues. To revive talks with Iran, Europeans should be proactive and profit from the momentum of Biden's victory.<sup>88</sup> In this context, to ensure that efforts for regional dialogue are successful, EU countries should pay attention to choosing the right strategy. Successful strategies to revive multilateral efforts need not be crowded talks. Rather, they should begin on a bilateral basis, then become talks among subgroups of countries from Europe and the Gulf region and finally move to wider multilateral fora. This is very important because progress lies not only in the outcome – i.e., a multilateral talk convened to solve regional issues – but in the process, too: by starting with a bilateral setting, European countries would facilitate dialogues otherwise impossible in a multilateral setting and only when the diplomatic talks are on their way will they extend them to more actors. In the last analysis, bilateral relations between EU and GCC countries are not an evil to be shunned. While they are detrimental to European and GCC interests if they leave space to the egoism of single countries, if used wisely these bilateral ties can help build trust between allies and partners and ultimately help bring more countries to the negotiating table. A good security framework is an inclusive security framework, and this applies all the more in the Gulf. If the European Commission wants to follow up on von der Leyen's willingness to lead a "geopolitical commission,"<sup>89</sup> it should adopt a more coordinated policy in the GCC at the EU level.

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<sup>86</sup> Steffen Hertog, "EU-GCC relations in the era of the second oil boom," *C.A.P. Working Paper* (December 2007), 2. Munich: Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssor-110728>

<sup>87</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Rise and Decline of the Gulf Cooperation Council," in *The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Abingdon: Routledge), 417.

<sup>88</sup> Cinzia Bianco, "Gulf of Difference," 16.

<sup>89</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, "Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session". Speech, European Parliament, Strasbourg, November 27, 2019.

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