

Sustaining Gulf National Security in Light of the Ukraine Crisis

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 grabbed the world's attention and led to a reexamination of global security arrangements. The Gulf region found itself exposed to some of those consequences despite not being directly involved. Still, the impact of the crisis in the Gulf region is multifaceted. While the Gulf states seek to avoid being embroiled in a confrontation between Russia and the West, the Ukraine crisis has already impacted the region's energy, economic, political, and agricultural sectors.

This paper looks at the consequences of the Ukraine crisis on the Gulf region and the series of political and strategic considerations that have led the GCC states to balance their position with external allies while still looking at the West as the main security guarantor for the region. At the same time, countries such as Saudi Arabia are examining new arrangements to both ensure that its security needs are met and to compensate for ever-unpredictable U.S. security assistance.

Historical Context on the Ukraine Crisis, Current Realities, and Developments

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia did not come as a complete surprise. Ever since the demise of the Soviet Union, Moscow has kept a wary eye on Ukrainian independence and has sought to maintain levels of political control that ensures some form of direct Russian influence. The Orange Revolutions in late 2004 and early 2005 initiated a period of political turmoil which saw Russian allies being removed from positions of political power and led to discussions with the West about moving Ukraine closer to the institutional structure of Europe. One outcome was the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014, which served to provide Ukraine with both financial and political support from the European Union. This was an instrumental step in showing western endorsement for the prosperity of Ukraine.

The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was viewed by Moscow as an added threat to its own national security interests, among other things, for which Russian President Vladimir Putin took the drastic step of imposing military authority over Ukraine's southern Crimean Peninsula. By further sponsoring and backing separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine (collectively known as the Donbas), Russian and Ukrainian forces began to shell each other in a protracted low-level military conflict (DeYoung, 2014). While Europe sought to contain the conflict through the so-called Minsk accords, it soon became apparent that a resolution was not imminent, as neither Russia, nor Ukraine, were committed to fulfilling their ends of the agreement.

Following a massive build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border beginning in early 2021 on the grounds that it feared threat of eastern expansion of NATO, Russia launched a full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. To justify what Moscow refers to only as an advanced military campaign, Russia stated that they had failed to secure written guarantees against a continued eastern expansion of NATO. With Ukraine only the latest case example, Russia has previously sought the limitation of weapons exports to countries near its border as well as prohibited any NATO military cooperation with other post-Soviet governments, for example, Georgia.

The decision by President Putin to enter Ukraine brought open military conflict back to the European continent and raised fears of a wider-scale confrontation including possible design of Russia on parts of Eastern Europe such as the Baltic states. In response, Europe and the United States launched both a massive military support program for Ukraine as well as an unprecedented sanctions regime against the Russian state. A key aspect was the determination by Europe to phase out all energy dependency on Moscow as quickly as possible.

Nine months after the outbreak of the war, Russia



has failed to pull off its top objectives, with Ukrainian troops succeeding in pushing back against Russian forces and regaining some of its captured territory. Yet, it remains uncertain how developments on the ground will play out in the coming months. Although he has suffered quite a few losses in the war, President Putin is still far from acknowledging that the move into Ukraine was a mistake. Rather, he is likely to double down and try to regain the initiative. He has let it be known that Russia will use “all the forces and resources” needed, touting his country’s “various weapons of destruction.”

support from elsewhere. Doing so, however, will not be easy. The war has had a global impact on the economy and energy relations even outside of the West. The conflict and its consequences are not a black and white issue, meaning Moscow will have to navigate carefully if it hopes to gain that needed support from outside the West.

The imminent threats resulting from the war were taken up at the G20 Summit in Bali in November 2022. Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and reiterated the national positions of member states, demanding Russia’s complete and unconditional withdrawal from the territory of Ukraine. The G20 members stressed how the war is inflicting immense human suffering and exacerbating “existing fragilities in the global economy – constraining growth, increasing inflation, disrupting supply chains, heightening energy and food insecurity, and elevating financial stability risks” (The White House 2022).



Sources: Institute for the Study of War with American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project. • Note: Areas controlled by Russia and reclaimed by Ukraine are as of Nov. 13. • The New York Times

Figure 1. Russian Forces, ([Institute for the Study of War](#) (ISW), November 13, 2022).

On this front, much will depend on the position taken by the rest of the international community. With the conflict being seen largely as one between Russia and the West, Russia retains the possibility of escaping the impact of sanctions and Western isolation if they are able to gather sufficient



Interpreting the Gulf Position towards the Ukraine Crisis

With the Russian invasion, the GCC states found themselves confronted with their own crisis, even though they were not direct parties to the conflict, neither did the invasion happen in their immediate neighbourhood. The initial Gulf perspective on the war in Ukraine was that it was first and foremost, a European issue, with Europe having the misfortune of bearing the brunt since they depend so heavily on Russia for energy supplies. However, due to issues such as rising energy prices and energy security concerns, the GCC states found themselves under quick scrutiny from western allies for their soft stances and rather neutral responses to the war, especially their refusal to increase oil production at the behest of the United States.

The position taken by the individual GCC states was expressed on February 23, 2022, when the permanent Saudi delegation to the United Nations (UN) in New York delivered a statement expressing the stance on behalf of the GCC member states which included backing all efforts aimed at resolving the crisis through dialogue and diplomacy, stressing the importance of continuing work to defuse tension and reduce escalation to ensure the return of stability. Anwar Gargash, a UAE presidential adviser, stated that the Gulf state, “believes that taking sides would only lead to more violence” and insisted that all parties should “resort to diplomatic action and negotiate to find a political solution” (Kerr, Al-Atrush & England, 2022).

Although mostly neutral, there is an attitude within the GCC states of disapproval toward Russia’s aggression and an emphasis has been placed on humanitarian concerns and reaching a diplomatic solution. The Gulf Cooperation Council scrutinized the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, calling for a return to diplomacy, dialogue and peaceful negotiations between parties to the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. “We follow with grave concerns the deterioration of the situation

in Ukraine, especially in humanitarian terms,” Saudi Arabia’s deputy representative to the UN Mohammed Al-Ateeq said in front of the United Nations general assembly’s emergency session on Ukraine. On behalf of the GCC, Al-Ateeq called on all parties to abide by their obligations towards international law and international humanitarian law, especially with regard to the protection of civilians and refraining from targeting or destroying any vital installations.

During the 5th GCC-Russia Joint Ministerial Conference for Strategic Engagement, held in Riyadh on June 1, 2022, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, spoke as President of the GCC at the time, and emphasized that “our stance as Gulf countries regarding the Russian-Ukrainian crisis is unified.” GCC countries concur that the humanitarian crisis stemming from such issues as food shortages in MENA countries, who so heavily rely on wheat imports from Ukraine, is an urgent matter. He reiterated this after the meeting, stating: “Today we had two fruitful meetings with the Russian and Ukrainian ministers, during which we stated our unified stance regarding the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and its negative consequences, namely the food security of the affected countries and the world,” Prince Faisal said (Al-Sulami & Al-Hamawi, 2022).

GCC Position and Regional Alignments – Range of Regional Responses

Although there is a level of agreement among GCC states in regard to the Ukraine war, the Gulf’s perspective on the crisis is not monolithic. All GCC members voted in March 2022 in favor of a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but Gulf monarchies have also taken on more nuanced positions. A closer look at the individual GCC positions highlights some of these nuances.



Kuwait

Given its history, it is not surprising that of all the GCC countries, Kuwait has taken the position most closely aligned with states against Moscow. The invasion on Ukraine is reminiscent of the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein led Iraq, so it is no wonder that Kuwait observes Russia’s actions in Ukraine with more condemnation than the rest of the Gulf. Kuwait’s foreign minister has emphasized the necessity of Ukraine’s sovereignty, being the only Arab state on the list of 80 co-sponsors of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution in February 2022 that condemned Russia for attacking Ukraine (Kuwait Mission UN, 2022). Furthermore, on the same day that Russia launched its multi-pronged offensive, Kuwait’s foreign ministry emphasized the significance of defending Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereign rights: “The State of Kuwait stresses the importance of respecting Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty and affirms its full support to international efforts aimed at calming the situation, defusing escalation, promoting self-restraint and addressing international conflicts by peaceful means,” a foreign ministry statement read (Kuwait News Agency – KUNA, 2022).

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Qatar

Qatar’s Foreign Minister, Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, addressed the 49th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on February 28, 2022, urging “constructive dialogue within diplomatic means to resolve the crisis” while also emphasizing Qatar’s “respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its national recognized border.” (MOFA Qatar, 2022). In the meantime, Qatar’s relations with Moscow have been strained somewhat, as world leaders have reached out to Qatar to compensate for sanctions on Russia’s oil export. Additionally, while Qatari investments in the Russian market cannot be exited, new ones are on a temporary hold. The Qatari foreign minister indicated that Qatar’s investment decisions are “based on commercial assessment, until we see a better atmosphere and more political stability, we are not thinking about increasing that these days” (Normanton, 2022). Qatar has also been in contact with Ukrainian President Zelensky who stated

“I continue negotiations with the leaders. [and have] Received support from the Emir of Qatar”

(President Zelensky Twitter, 2022). Almost two weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, was in the White House with President Biden, discussing US efforts to obtain extra gas supplies for Europe in the case of a disruption in Russian supply. On February 22, 2022, just prior to the invasion, Qatar's Emir Tamim hosted the leaders of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, signifying Qatar's potential role in diversifying European gas imports (GECF, 2022).

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi and Emirati reactions have been particularly telling. On March 1, 2022, the Saudi cabinet with King Salman presiding reaffirmed its support for international efforts to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine via communication and diplomacy, restore security and stability, and offer a forum for negotiations leading to a political settlement (Saudi Gazette, 2022). Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman emphasized the Kingdom's support for any move that might help de-escalate the issue in a phone conversation with Ukraine's President Zelensky on March 3, 2022. During a previous phone call with President Putin, the Crown Prince expressed a willingness to mediate. According to the Saudi Press Agency, the Crown Prince "supports efforts that lead to a political solution to end the crisis and achieve security and stability (SPA, 2022). More recently, on October 14, 2022, the Kingdom provided a \$400 million humanitarian aid package to Ukraine and reaffirmed its readiness to continue mediation efforts and support everything that contributes to de-escalation of the war.

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, Riyadh and Moscow have taken the decision to preemptively halt inflation in oil prices after OPEC+ agreed to slash oil output by two million barrels per day (bdp) starting in November 2022. Russia holds a significant role in the energy markets, so in spite of the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia has taken cooperative steps with Moscow in this regard, much to the chagrin of the West. For Saudi Arabia, the Saudi-Russia alignment has been built on economic interests that resulted in higher oil

prices and a successful drive to reduce supply during the pandemic-driven loss in oil demand. Given the market uncertainty surrounding the global economy and oil market outlooks amidst the crisis in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia does not see itself in a position to cut ties with Russia as a member of OPEC+. Instead, by maintaining these relations, the kingdom solely seeks to act as a moderating force to stabilize the oil market as benchmark oil prices steadily decrease, stoking fears of a global recession. The OPEC+ meeting in Vienna is therefore seen as a collective decision taken by OPEC+ state members and in no way reflects any support for Moscow in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

UAE

In a joint statement issued on February 23, 2022, Russian and Emirati Foreign Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed discussed the two countries' friendly relations and their strategic partnership, emphasizing their "keenness to enhance the prospects of UAE-Russian cooperation across various fields for the higher good of their peoples" (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation - MOFAIC, 2022). Nonetheless, on February 25, 2022, the UAE, which has a seat on the United Nations Security Council, joined China and India in abstaining from a resolution condemning Russia's invasion. At the time, senior Emirati diplomatic adviser Anwar Gargash justified the decision by saying that the UAE "believes that taking sides would only lead to more violence" (Salah, 2022). In its attempts to balance out positions, the UAE seek to maintain open channels of communication through which messages can be conveyed. During his visit to Moscow in October 2022, UAE President Mohammed Bin Zayid emphasized the need to "achieve positive results for military de-escalation [in Ukraine], the reduction of humanitarian repercussions and the achievement of a political agreement to reach peace" according to the UAE Foreign Ministry (Belmonte, 2022). The UAE has also been concerned about the situation surrounding the Zaporizhka nuclear power plant and used the meetings to try to de-escalate tension concerning the potential use of nuclear weapons.

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Bahrain

Bahrain has not taken a firm stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war. During Bahrain Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa's meeting with US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, on March 2, 2022, the two sides discussed Russia's attack against Ukraine. Secretary Blinken commended Bahrain for voting in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution. At the same time, Bahrain's politicians agree that Moscow is an important political and commercial partner and as such, the Russia-Ukraine conflict should not become an impediment to that relationship. On May 31, 2022, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. They reiterated the significance of cooperation in “resolving the conflict in Ukraine in a way that achieves the interests of Kyiv and Moscow and the security and stability of Europe and the world” (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022).

Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has maintained a neutral approach. Concerns about the growing military build-up were highlighted by a diplomatic spokesperson for the Omani Foreign Ministry

stating concern “over the repercussions of the escalation in that region and appealed to the countries and in the international community to redouble diplomatic efforts to overcome the crisis in accordance with the principles of international law and humanitarian values” (Foreign Ministry of Oman, 2022). During Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Oman on May 11, 2022, the Foreign Minister of the Sultanate of Oman, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, stated that Oman follows the situation in Ukraine with great interest and “supports all international efforts, especially the efforts of the United Nations aimed at strengthening security and stability in the region.” He added, “the risk of escalation will bring a nightmare more than possible destruction, and we call on everyone to find another way to resolve this crisis” (Al Nassriya, 2022). Oman's unwillingness to support one side or the other in the war may be understood in the context of its political trajectory since Oman is recognized for its neutrality policies.

For the Gulf states, their foreign policy remains focused on keeping, in all situations, the window for dialogue and diplomacy opened. Even though the conflict in Ukraine does not fall on the borders of the Gulf states, concerns for a long-lasting conflict could complicate GCC states' relations with foreign actors, affecting their foreign policies down the line, especially given the current turbulence in Saudi-US relations. Nevertheless, given the current political climate with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the Gulf states are fully committed to the UN Charter and the importance of a stable security environment through a joint resolution, not only in the Gulf but also in other contexts which can only be brought about by cooperation in a region that is unsettled.

External Pressure (U.S.) on Gulf States – International Positioning

Several factors come into play when analyzing the GCC's position in the conflict. One is that the Gulf states envisage substantial changes in Europe's security order and the potential for changes in the global balance of power. While the conflict in

Ukraine does not pose a direct threat to regional stability, various indirect effects have the potential to be significant for Gulf states' interests. Energy market disruptions, economic dislocation induced by international sanctions against Russia, and new areas of friction in (some) political relationships with the Biden administration are among them.

The position of the Gulf countries on the war in Ukraine must therefore also be seen within the context of their relations with external powers, primarily the United States, and the GCC's interest in shifting their relations towards greater parity. Overall, the longstanding bond between the GCC and the US is undergoing some significant changes over the war in Yemen, Washington's Iran policy, U.S. condition on arms sales, and fundamentally regional doubts as to the reliability of the US security position towards them and their allies. At the same time, there is widespread development and progress being made in individual GCC countries necessitating them to focus their attention to securing their own national interests.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine therefore can be viewed as a significant test for GCC nations' ability to navigate in a multipolar world. Regional countries, including America's traditional allies, are balancing their bets between Russia and the US-led Western camp, assessing the effects of the conflict and seeking to relieve its constraints on the region's economy and social fabric. In addition, the GCC members, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are using the Ukraine crisis to renegotiate their relationships with allies like Washington to rebalance and redraw the parameters of Gulf-US interests.

The dichotomy in place could be quickly resolved if the U.S. and the GCC states were able to overcome their current challenges. This means addressing some of the key questions with which the Arab Gulf states find themselves confronted: Is the United States staying in the Middle East as it has done historically, or is it reorienting its attention elsewhere? Can a workable relationship be reestablished regarding a comprehensive energy policy, a commitment to the stability of

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the Gulf, and a common understanding on how to effectively deal with the Iranian factor? In what ways can Washington and the Gulf capitals come together when it comes to handling the ongoing conflict in Yemen, Libya and Syria in a way that serves the interests of both sides? Failure to come up with adequate answers to these question means that the region's declining trust in Washington weakens the US's efforts to counter Russia's and China's expanding regional influence (Schenker, 2022).

The GCC states do favor a continued relationship with Moscow. Aside from the need to pursue multilateral engagements, there is a concern that Russia could act against GCC interests when it comes to Syria or Iran, something that holds negative repercussions on Gulf security. On October 6, 2022, Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber met with senior Moscow officials to agree on a deal for the delivery of



weapons to Russian forces. Since then, Iran has supplied Russia with surface-to-surface short range ballistic missiles, in addition to drones, a move that is seen in the Gulf states as particularly worrisome, considering their volatile relationship with Iran. Thus, while the GCC states hope that their ties to the Kremlin will enable them to voice their concerns, these relations do not prevent them to also call out closer Russia-Iran ties. If the military relations between Moscow and Tehran were to strengthen further, the GCC states would likely to draw some consequences and limit their engagement with Russia.

The crisis in Ukraine is being used by the Islamic Republic of Iran as both an attempt to solidify a relationship with Moscow as Russia finds itself increasingly isolated, and to divert attention away from the massive protests that have broken out in the country since September 2022. Iran has also once again started military actions in the Gulf region with attacks on Kurdish positions in northern Iraq and an attack on a tanker in the Gulf of Oman in mid-November, thus again threatening the safety of international maritime routes.

As far as Riyadh is concerned, Iranian action in regional theatres is a clear example of Tehran's wider regional ambitions. In the case of Ukraine, Iran now has an opportunity to deploy its weapons systems in a high-intensity environment and learn appropriate lessons on how to advance those systems further. This is occurring without any intervention from the international community. The Ukraine conflict has shown the potential of loitering munitions guided by GPS, such as the Shahed-131 and Shahed-136, which heightens the concerns of the GCC states, in particular Saudi Arabia, given the possibility of using these ammunitions in future air strike attacks from the kingdom's border. It has been perceived as a late wake up call, as the kingdom has been trying to combat the issue of Iran's regional interventionist policy and its involvement in boosting its capacity to move militants and supplies from one theatre to another, contributing to inherent regional instability.

Maintaining Gulf National Interests and Security

In light of these new concerns about Iran-Russia ties, it is fair to assume that the GCC will maintain an open relationship with Russia under certain conditions, but not at all costs. In addition to complicating the relationship with traditional allies such as the United States, the Russian action on Ukraine has complicated some specific issues on the ground. For example, food security, both in terms of supply and price, moved to the top of the agenda for several MENA nations since the region accounts for 70% of Russia's wheat exports in 2021. This is problematic for the Gulf states since they are not insulated and will have to meet local needs. Diversifying import sources, boosting local agricultural output, and investing in agricultural firms all contribute to the GCC governments' abilities to accumulate and gather enough reserves to mitigate the consequences of future crises (Welsh, 2022).

On the energy front, due to their capability to replace portions of Russian oil supplies in Europe and Asia, the demand for Saudi and Emirati oil significantly soared in late February 2022. Naturally, the GCC states have benefitted from the high oil prices as the income has helped replenish their cash reserves after the pandemic significantly reduced them. However, extremely high oil prices and inflation are accompanied by the risk of market overheating and instability, resulting in an imbalanced energy market.

Moreover, there is the danger of energy issues becoming highly politicized, as witnessed following the decision by OPEC+ member states to decrease oil production when much of the West and particularly the United States, had hoped to see a move in the opposite direction. Gulf nations are not in a hurry to expand output to compensate for Russian oil withdrawal, when it is not in their economic interest. OPEC's top priorities have been preserving oil demand and price stability. According to the Saudi Foreign Ministry, the kingdom has upheld a "principled" stance on



the conflict in Ukraine and had denounced “any infringement on countries’ sovereignty over their territories.” Saudi Arabia and other major oil-exporting countries continue to oppose politicizing oil and disrupting OPEC+ cooperation over the complexity of the Ukraine crisis. In a statement issued after receiving a phone call from President Biden on February 9, 2022, King Salman Al-Saud emphasized the “role of the historic OPEC+ agreement in this regard and the importance of maintaining the agreement” (Saudi Press Agency, 2022).

Until recently, the Gulf states’ objective remains to avoid jeopardizing their economic and security interests against the backdrop of what it views as a great power competition between the west and Russia. Yet, there is also a recognition that the balancing act, mainly of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, will be difficult to sustain in the long run since safeguarding their national interests and security outweighs the benefit of taking either side of the Ukraine issue.

The bottom line is that the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the Gulf region is multifaceted. While the Gulf states seek to avoid being embroiled in a confrontation between Russia and the West, the Ukraine crisis has disrupted various critical sectors of their economies, ranging from oil and gas to agricultural imports. Against the background of the Ukraine war, the relationship between the Gulf nations and major Western powers and allies continues shifting away from its long-established trajectory. Yet, it is still too soon to argue that a fundamental break with the West is inevitable or that GCC positions have shifted to the East in a permanent manner. As the situation in Ukraine evolves, the main factor determining Gulf regional security remains uncertain.



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