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The Changing World Order and GCC-SSA Relations

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INTRODUCTION

The global order is increasingly defined by multipolarity, with various centers of power emerging, and the dominance of a few powers increasingly challenged. This manifests in renewed international contestation, mounting transnational challenges, and shifting alliances between states that exclude a conventionally strong role for the Western world and a more assertive Global South. One result of the [declining centrality](#) of global powers in the global economy and politics alongside the emergence of a multipolar world is that of bringing Gulf states and Sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations closer through economic, diplomatic, and security ties.

As these states position themselves as key players in the new political landscape, the shared goal is to navigate global challenges without being forced to choose sides, a strategy that continues to enhance their diplomatic leverage. These moves are strategic, as they enable both regions, sometimes together, to exert influence over issues such as climate change, global peace, security, and the global economy while avoiding entanglement in great power politics. This context has created various opportunities for Gulf and Sub-Saharan African (SSA) states to navigate shared challenges and better position themselves to play a more significant role in global affairs within the South-South cooperation framework. At the same time, it has ushered in a flurry of challenges for both regions. Needless to say, the changing world order is significantly shaping – and possibly being shaped by – the evolving relations between Gulf and SSA nations.

This policy paper examines the key factors that shape GCC-SSA relations within the changing world order. It analyses some of the indicators of *change* in terms of economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical shifts that shape

relations in today's global context, showing how they shape the GCC-SSA partnership. The paper then underlines some of the challenges in terms of global dynamics, suggesting how both regions can carefully navigate them to reap the benefits of their growing engagement.

The Global Economy and Evolving GCC-SSA Relations

Over the last two decades, geopolitical shifts have affected the global economy. The US-China trade war has caused the global economy to become fragmented. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 threatens to reignite a full-scale trade war, particularly with China, with the [risk](#) of tariffs of up to 60% on all imported goods. Economic growth has lost pace, with the [World Bank](#) warning that the global economy is on track to experience lower growth levels than before 2020. The outlook for the world's poorest economies is even more dire as punishing levels of debt distress, higher-for-longer interest rates, constricting trade possibilities, and costly climate events remain a drag on their economic prospects. With growing populations, limited public financing, and growing debt levels it is difficult for governments from SSA to repay their loans, mostly in US dollars. A stronger dollar makes loan repayment more expensive and diverts spending on healthcare and human development overall. In return, the aging Bretton-Woods system is also increasingly [challenged](#) for its inability to properly address these countries' specific needs.

Meanwhile, conflicting pressures from the wars in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan have introduced high levels of volatility and inflationary pressure as insecurity in the Red Sea and the Panama Canal have led to disruptions to trade routes and the high cost of maritime trade. Shipping disruptions in these vital waterways offer a real-time reminder of the risks posed to global trade and output by



security problems and the pressure from climate change. The outlook continues to weigh on people's purchasing power, fuelling political frustration, and causing people everywhere to feel anxious about the future and to [lose trust](#) in institutions, governments, and markets.

Within this global economic environment, different approaches to global and regional politics have emerged. Developing economies in SSA are forging partnerships that will help them reduce public debt, and improve infrastructure financing as well as overall economic growth and development. The Gulf states, for their part, are keen to seize the opportunities presented by a continent that boasts some of the [fastest-growing](#) and untapped markets and top investment destinations as well as natural resources that are essential to the expansion of their economy. With over 1.4 billion people, half of whom will be under the age of 25 by 2050, Africa is the second fastest-growing region after Asia. Although real GDP growth declined in 2022 owing to multiple domestic and global shocks, the continent's growth rate is projected to rise to 3.8% in 2024 and consolidate to 4.2% in 2025. In addition, the new African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will create the world's largest free trade area with a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion.

Having previously focused their engagement with African states in North Africa, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are now extending their economic ties to Sub-Saharan Africa, marked by increased trade and investment between the two regions. This shift is driven partly by a desire to balance economics and geopolitics. Both sub-regions are motivated by the need to diversify their markets and de-risk strategies in a world of volatile economic stability. Various countries from the GCC and SSA consider their economic engagement as an opportunity for multi-alignment. They view Western partners with more [discontent](#) owing to issues such as debt distress, the high cost of development lending, global tax norms, climate finance, and reform of the overall global financial architecture which they view as designed by the West for the West.

As Gulf states have the financial resources necessary to compete with economic superpowers like the US and China in SSA, many African governments see them as important partners in addressing infrastructure gaps and debt levels, increasing agricultural productivity, and creating jobs. For countries like South Africa, Ethiopia, and Kenya, [Saudi Arabia](#) is a viable trading partner providing liquidity for their fiscal, monetary, and developmental needs. Trade between the UAE and [Ethiopia, for example](#), is following an upward trend.

Gulf countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are increasingly using economic statecraft to strengthen their geostrategic relationships with African nations. They are presenting themselves as valuable allies in Africa's pursuit of economic growth, offering an alternative to traditional Western approaches to development and cooperation. By flexing its [financial muscle](#) in SSA contexts, Riyadh is also leveraging its engagements with SSA states to increase its soft power appeal in the region while hoping to match the overwhelming clout of its fellow GCC member state, the UAE.

Infrastructure development is a major focus of the GCC-SSA partnership at a time when China's investments and sovereign lending to countries in the region are [declining](#). Over the past decade, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have [actively pursued](#) investment opportunities in Africa. As a result, the UAE has become the world's ninth-largest investor in Africa, measured by the average number of jobs created, and the fourth-largest overall investor on the continent, surpassed only by the United States, China, and the EU. Between 2012-22, the UAE invested \$101.9 billion in 628 projects, while African investment in the GCC over the same period was \$3 billion in 141 projects. In 2018 alone, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development financed more than 66 projects in 28 African countries, totaling \$16.6 billion. These investments have helped foster economic development and improved connectivity between both regions.



For its part, Saudi Arabia has funded more than 800 development projects worth US\$20 billion in over 100 countries around the world through its Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). In Africa alone, SFD has financed over 400 projects in 46 countries worth US\$10.7 billion, accounting for 57% of its funding in developing countries worldwide, and supporting sectors including agribusiness, energy and mining, transportation, logistics, infrastructure, and tourism. Gulf-funded projects, such as roads, ports, and airports, are critical in improving connectivity and boosting regional trade.

Investments in renewable energy and rare minerals are also central to Gulf states' economic engagement with SSA. Africa holds a [significant portion](#) of the world's mineral resources needed for the clean energy transition. The continent possesses about 85 percent of the world's manganese, 80 percent of global platinum and chromium deposits, nearly 50 percent of the world's cobalt, a fifth of the world's graphite, and 6 percent of copper reserves. This positions the continent as a theatre for geopolitical competition among China, the US, Europe, and the Gulf countries.

Among Gulf states, the UAE is at the forefront of critical mineral investments in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia through the powerful state-owned company International Resources Holdings (IRH); Abu Dhabi is also in advanced talks to extract various critical minerals in Burundi, Tanzania, and Kenya. Saudi Arabia has been actively pursuing mining deals in Africa through its state-owned - and the Gulf's largest - mining company, Maaden, and its sovereign wealth funds such as the Public Investment Fund (PIF). These investments seek to promote economic transition, improve global market access, partnership diversification, and energy transition.

These interventions point to the diversification of the pool of partners SSA countries can strategically engage with beyond traditional Western partners

while still prioritizing the Gulf states as important investment partners. As Gulf states, which once engaged more with North Africa, are becoming closer to SSA states, SSA countries are also diversifying their economic relationships towards other middle powers. The recent BRICS Summit in [Kazan](#), Russia, held from 22-24 October 2024, with participation from Gulf and Sub-Saharan African nations, highlights this growing trend, with opportunities for [increased cooperation](#) and economic engagement between both regions. Ethiopia joined South Africa as the second Sub-Saharan African nation in BRICS, while the UAE participated as the sole Gulf member. Although Saudi Arabia has been invited to join BRICS, they haven't officially joined yet; the Kingdom's Foreign Minister, however, attended the summit as an observer.

This expansion, coupled with the growing interest of over 30 more states to join the bloc, reflects the growing dissatisfaction with Western-dominated institutions and a desire to create alternative frameworks for global economic governance. For participating GCC and SSA countries, BRICS+ allows them to assert their economic interests and reduce vulnerability to external pressures deriving from the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between East and West, and the growing alienation between the Global North and South. Accordingly, GCC and SSA states' engagement through BRICS not only signals a commitment by emerging and middle powers from the Global South toward mutually accelerated economic growth and sustainable development, but it also underscores the importance of the GCC-SSA partnership in global affairs. Both regions are well-positioned to leverage BRICS to advance their interests and shape the evolving global landscape.

The potential for greater economic ties is further enhanced by continuous changes in global politics and is demonstrated by increased forums and summits that bring leaders from both regions and other parts of the world together. During the [Saudi Arabia-Africa summit](#) in November 2023, a host of financing and energy-related agreements were signed between Riyadh and SSA states such as



Nigeria, Senegal, Chad, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Eritrea, South Sudan, Kenya, and Rwanda. The Future Minerals Forum in Riyadh in January 2024 saw the signing of deals with four countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – which has major deposits of copper, cobalt, tin, tantalum, and lithium - for cooperation in mining. As cracks in the global economy deepen, the UAE has negotiated and concluded Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with various SSA countries such as Mauritius (only awaiting ratification) as well as Kenya and Congo-Brazzaville (yet to be signed). For Abu Dhabi, CEPAs will deepen its economic ties and strategic partnerships with the region as it builds its position as a global trade and logistics hub. SSA countries will enjoy lower or eliminated tariffs, simpler customs procedures, enhanced market access, and rules-based competition.

Forging Political Alliances on the Global Stage

Beyond a worrisome economic outlook, there is growing [uncertainty and instability](#) in today's world. Geopolitical divides are preventing the world from coming together around common challenges. This has led to the rise of a new multipolar order that is more inclusive, with a vital and growing role for middle and emerging powers in international relations. The transition is forcing global powers like the US, the EU, China, and Russia to adjust how they interact with Africa and the Middle East. But the context is also shaping how GCC and SSA states present themselves to each other – as responsible international actors.

There is a growing sense of insecurity owing to the worsening of geopolitical tensions and growing numbers of high-intensity conflicts in the Middle East and across parts of Africa, including Sudan. All this is happening at a time when multilateralism is under [attack](#). International institutions like the United Nations (UN) charged with maintaining international peace and security are facing a crisis of norms enforcement relating to various crises. The double standards exhibited by global powers like the US towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's bombardment of Gaza point to

challenges in the rules-based order, raising questions about the credibility of the Western-led global governance system broadly.

Growing [dissatisfaction](#) with how the permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – exert dominance over global politics has led to criticism of the Council as being broken. With Russia, a permanent member of the UNSC, invading Ukraine while showing no restraint, and the United States, another P5 member channelling military and financial support towards Israel's aggression in Gaza in pursuit of its security interests, the credibility of the Council is diminishing.

Despite the nature of security threats rapidly changing from what they were in 1945, the UNSC continues to use outdated mechanisms to deal with fast-evolving crises. As powerful states continue to deliver contradictory responses to ongoing global crises, there is [global consensus](#) that the Council is falling dangerously short of delivering on its mandate to maintain international peace and security and therefore requires practical steps that support its effectiveness in principle application and prioritization of global representation.

As the UN's performance and legitimacy suffer, Sub-Saharan Africa and Gulf countries are growing politically closer. States in both regions are increasingly solidifying their mutual geopolitical interests in diplomatic ties, within the broader narrative of South-South cooperation. During the UAE's tenure on the Council (October-December 2023), it worked collaboratively with Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique, the bloc of three elected African members of the UNSC (or the A3) on several issues.

More prominently, the UAE stood firmly in [support](#) of the African position on the financing of its peace support operations (PSOs) through the UN which led to the unanimous adoption of Security Council [resolution 2719](#) in December 2023. The Resolution provides, among other things, that



African Union-led PSOs can receive up to 75% of their budget from UN-assessed contributions. Additionally, SSA states - Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique - engaged with the UAE as the Gulf representative on the Council on issues relating to the resolution of a ceasefire in Gaza. The UAE-proposed resolution on Gaza which was eventually [passed](#) on December 22, 2023, did enjoy the full support of the Africa Group in the Security Council.

In particular, both regions support the comprehensive reform of the UNSC, with a view to making it more democratic, representative, effective, and efficient. By recognizing the [common African position](#) on the UNSC, GCC states have shown their support for the legitimate aspirations of SSA countries and the African Union to play a greater role in international affairs in an increasingly fragmented global order. Within the UN Security Council, both SSA and Gulf nations have become valuable partners in securing diplomatic support on issues such as regional security and financing for peace activities on the global stage.

This shows, however implicitly, that both regions are cooperating within the global multilateral setting as part of their mutual strategies to expand their diplomatic influence globally. They are also cooperating in several formal frameworks of South-South cooperation such as BRICS. Following the recent BRICS summit in Russia, the [Kazan Declaration](#) underlined the shared commitment of participating states – some of them from the Gulf and SSA - to “improving global governance by promoting a more agile, effective, efficient, responsive, representative, legitimate, democratic and accountable international and multilateral system.” Within the G20 grouping, [South Africa](#) and Saudi Arabia through the leaders’ [declaration](#), also acknowledged the G20 Call to Action on Global Governance Reform - launched by Brazil during its G20 presidency within the framework of South-South cooperation. The declaration reiterated calls for reform of the multilateral trading system, international economic and financial institutions, and the UNSC.

These multilateral platforms offer fresh opportunities for diplomatic cooperation and political dialogue between the two regions. They also enable broader collaboration with other non-Western nations like China, Brazil, and Türkiye within the South-South Cooperation framework. Additionally, GCC states have increased their involvement in African forums such as the African Union (AU), while African nations are participating more in Middle Eastern organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This demonstrates a growing political alignment within an increasingly fragmented global context. Furthermore, events like the Saudi Arabia-Africa Summit in November 2023 highlight the commitment to stronger ties, also evidenced by the numerous bilateral agreements signed.

GCC-SSA Security Cooperation in a Changing World

The changing geopolitical landscape is pushing both Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gulf region to work more closely together on security issues. This increased cooperation is happening through more institutional interaction and involvement in regional conflicts that have global consequences. Rising global tensions have significant ramifications for both regions, and the recent Gaza conflict serves as a prime example. The Gaza conflict has had a direct and indirect [impact](#) on Africa's economic, diplomatic, and security landscape. It has also complicated relations among African countries, between the African Union (AU) and Israel, and between Africa and Israel's major allies. SSA states now face the challenge of balancing their long-standing support for Palestine with their growing relations with GCC states and Israel.

While Gulf states gradually side-lined Palestine in recent years to facilitate US-backed [Arab-Israeli normalization](#), they have collectively expressed strong criticism of Israel and its ally, the United States, since the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Various GCC states – through the 57-member Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) which



includes Saudi Arabia and the 22-member Arab League - voiced their support for South Africa's [institution of proceedings](#) at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel. Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Doha displayed a impression of unity in condemning the violence in Gaza and calling for an end to hostilities, by assuming [roles](#) consistent with their projection of diplomatic capital. Saudi Arabia drew on its convening power in the Arab and Islamic worlds; the UAE leveraged its presence as a non-voting member of the United Nations Security Council; and Qatar focused on mediation with Hamas.

While this signposted the decisive role these regional middle powers could play in finding a political solution to the conflict, it underscored alignment with the African positions in crisis diplomacy. This alignment between Gulf and SSA states, also through their regional organizations, underlines their shared commitment to maintaining peace and stability and upholding international resolutions in a volatile world order. The [African Union](#) (AU) played a prominent role in advocating for an end to hostilities and Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in line with international resolutions. The situation in Gaza was unfolding at a time when the AU's role as a global actor, envisioned in its Agenda 2063 plan, was increasingly gaining [recognition](#).

As the world becomes less stable, security cooperation has thus become central to GCC-SSA relations. Cooperation in the security domain is further enhanced by shared threats to both regions, from enduring conflicts such as the civil wars in Yemen and Sudan, to the situation in Libya, and ongoing tensions in the Horn of Africa. Additionally, terrorist and extremist groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Al-Qaida affiliates in the Sahel pose significant dangers. These conflicts and extremist activities have led to humanitarian crises, causing a surge in [forced migration](#) towards Gulf states.

Furthermore, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, [crucial maritime routes](#) for global trade, are vital to the economic and geostrategic interests of both

regions and for global powers. However, these waterways continue to be threatened by piracy, smuggling, and geopolitical competition. The proximity of Saudi Arabia to the Horn of Africa underscores the strategic importance of Gulf states' engagement in the sub-region through military and naval cooperation and investments in port infrastructure.

Instability in the Horn of Africa - particularly in Somalia and Sudan – and the Red Sea region poses risks to Gulf maritime security and trade. In the wake of the war in Gaza, Houthi rebels in Yemen have attacked commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea, threatening Saudi Arabia's [strategic goals](#) along its Western coast. War in Sudan also threatens Riyadh's ambitions to diversify its economy, hence its engagement in mediation efforts to end the war. Saudi Arabia has also upgraded its fleet in the Red Sea, strengthened its security partnerships with African states in the region, and supported multilateral initiatives including with US-led naval forces.

The Road Ahead: Overcoming challenges and seizing Opportunities

Both SSA and GCC states continue to navigate a world marked by shifting alliances and great power rivalries by balancing internal regional differences while deepening partnerships across multiple fronts – economic, political, and security. As the world moves towards a multipolar order, it is clear that states within both regions are more united than ever in their approach to both regional and global affairs. The ability to navigate the complex landscape of shifting alliances and a range of powers in pursuit of their strategic interests will greatly shape their relations moving forward.

As the global context is driving the two regions closer, there are emerging issues that will warrant prioritization by both GCC and SSA states and regional bodies. Within this evolving dynamic, it is evident that Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the focus of intense geopolitical struggle between world powers, including the US, China, and Russia



as well as middle powers from the Gulf, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.

On the economic front, investments at times come with political interference, exploitation of natural resources, and labor issues, bringing into sharp focus debates about whether Gulf states are different from Western actors in their engagement with SSA.

While Gulf states are perceived differently from traditional colonial powers - which gives them a unique advantage - growing concerns about the implications of their engagement in resource extraction and conflicts in places like Sudan call for them to carefully navigate their engagements in a manner that allows them to pursue their interests, without perpetuating colonial tendencies. The involvement of the UAE in the Sudan conflict has raised questions over whether Abu Dhabi can be a trusted and reliable contributor to regional stability and security in Africa.

Noticeably, the GCC-SSA relationship remains unbalanced, especially if we consider that Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have more economic power than most SSA states. As these states grow their involvement, SSA nations find themselves at a critical juncture, needing to balance the promise of economic growth and geopolitical influence all while protecting their own interests. The challenge remains for both regions to leverage the partnerships to their advantage, while mitigating the security, geopolitical and other risks that may arise.



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