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Beyond Transactional Diplomacy: The Gulf's Emergence as Architects of a New Global Order

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March 2025



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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are no longer merely reactive participants in global affairs; they are shaping debates on reform and governance in an evolving multipolar world. The shift is not just about asserting influence but about redefining how states engage in diplomacy, economic statecraft, and security arrangements. Unlike previous eras where GCC states were primarily aligned with Western interests, today, they are formulating multi-aligned policies and diversifying their partnerships to maximize national and regional benefits.

GCC States and the Global Reform Agenda

As the debate about the utility of current existing multilateral institutions continues, the GCC states are playing a role in shaping global reform discussions, particularly within the G20, BRICS, and the broader Global South. Rather than merely aligning with Western-led initiatives, they are advocating for systemic changes in financial governance, trade dynamics, and security frameworks that better reflect the multipolar world order.

One of the contributions of the GCC states to the global reform agenda is their push for a more inclusive and equitable economic order. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, have argued for restructuring international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, to provide greater representation for emerging economies. Their emphasis on development financing has been evident in initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Arab Coordination Group, which mobilizes billions in development assistance for Global South countries. Similarly, Gulf sovereign wealth funds are increasingly shaping global investment patterns, with the UAE's ADQ and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) financing critical infrastructure and technology projects across Africa and Asia.

In trade and economic diplomacy, GCC states are promoting models of agile and pragmatic deal-making. The UAE's rapid negotiation of Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with India on February 18, 2022, Indonesia on July 1, 2022, and Türkiye on March 3, 2023—demonstrates a shift away from the protracted and bureaucratic processes typical of Western-led trade negotiations. This approach accelerates economic integration and contributes to a more efficient global trade order.

Politically, Saudi Arabia is leading a variety of diplomatic efforts, such as regularly hosting peace talks and acting as a platform for dialogue between opposing parties. One notable example of this is the Kingdom's facilitation of U.S.-Russia and U.S.-Ukraine talks in 2025 to assist in bringing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to an end. Saudi Arabia's commitment to cultivating relationships with all major powers has opened the door for the Kingdom to play a crucial role in mediating complex international conflicts. Saudi Arabia's role in securing prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine in September 2022 also illustrates a proactive stance on global governance and humanitarian issues.

In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has been actively engaged in conflict resolution efforts across multiple fronts. The Kingdom has played a significant role in facilitating peace talks for Yemen,



working closely with the United Nations and regional actors to advance negotiations between the Yemeni government and the Houthis. Saudi Arabia has also contributed to diplomatic initiatives addressing the crises in Sudan including hosting mediation efforts with the United States. In Syria and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia is seeking interim solutions to existing political deadlocks such as the election of a Lebanese president after a period since October 2022 when the post has been vacant or guiding the political transition process under the new Syrian government. Furthermore, as a leading member of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, the Kingdom is committed to establishing a clear pathway toward the establishment of an independent Palestinian state as the key step towards peace and stability in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia also continues to urge other nations to join the international consensus, already endorsed by 149 countries, to officially recognize Palestine.

Qatar has carved out a reputation for its active role in conflict mediation, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, highlighting the broader influence of the GCC states in global diplomacy. Qatar's diplomatic efforts include the successful mediation of the Doha Agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban in 2020, as well as contributing to the initial ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in early 2025. These initiatives have bolstered the GCC's image as a constructive, cooperative actor in global peace and security. Additionally, the UAE has played its role in supporting peace processes and continues to promote stability in the Horn of Africa and the wider Middle East, often facilitating dialogue between opposing factions and providing humanitarian aid to conflict-affected regions. Together, such efforts have enhanced the GCC's role in approaching issues of global peace and security from a constructive, cooperative angle rather than the polarizing policies seen elsewhere.

Outside of its immediate neighborhood, the GCC states are contributing to reshape global governance by advocating for pragmatic, sovereignty-focused international norms. This aligns with broader Global South calls for a reexamination of the "rules-based order," which many see as selectively enforced. Her Excellency Lana Nusseibeh, Assistant Minister for Political Affairs of the UAE, has emphasized the need for a recalibrated multilateralism that recognizes regional solutions rather than imposing external models. Likewise, Saudi Arabia's push for reforms within the UN system—including discussions on Security Council representation—underscores the recognition that current global governance structures are outdated. In September 2024, during the UN's "Summit of the Future," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan called for reforms to make global institutions more representative and accountable, criticizing the inefficiencies of existing structures. Prince Faisal reinforced this stance at the BRICS Summit in Kazan, advocating for stronger, more inclusive international institutions that reflect the diverse needs of developing nations. Similarly, at the 16th BRICS Summit, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan emphasized the country's commitment to multilateralism as a tool for supporting peace and development, while UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan highlighted the necessity of collective action to address global challenges.

As the world moves into a multipolar era, the GCC's role will continue to evolve, with increased global engagement bringing both opportunities and challenges. Balancing deeper ties with emerging powers while maintaining traditional partnerships with the West is a key diplomatic challenge. For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's growing energy and investment ties with China and Russia have raised concerns in Washington, where policymakers view these ties through



strategic competition. Their engagement with BRICS and the Global South also risks tensions with Western allies who expect alignment on key security and economic issues. The GCC's expanding role in mediation and global governance also increases their exposure to geopolitical tensions. Saudi Arabia's involvement in Russia-Ukraine peace talks and Qatar's mediation between Israel and Hamas have enhanced their global standing but also placed them at the center of polarized conflicts, potentially straining their foreign policy agendas.

Moreover, the GCC's push for greater representation in global decision-making faces resistance from established powers. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE advocate for UN Security Council reform, Western-led institutions like the G7 and IMF remain hesitant, presenting a challenge in reshaping global institutions. Yet, rather than being passive participants in global reform discussions, the GCC states are positioning themselves as proactive advocates of a more multipolar, pragmatic, and flexible international system. Their efforts in the fields of financial innovation, trade leadership, diplomatic mediation, and governance reform, contributes to shaping a new global framework that prioritizes efficiency, equity, and strategic autonomy.

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