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Strategic Posturing in a Multipolar World

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Strategic Posturing in a Multipolar World

US President Donald Trump's tour of the Gulf was far more than a ceremonial engagement. It was a choreographed exercise in strategic projection: part arms bazaar, part geopolitical theater, and part economic sales mission.

The timing was critical. US influence in the Middle East is no longer a given, and the region's aspirations have outgrown their historical dependencies. With China extending its reach and Gulf monarchies pursuing bold visions of transformation, the visit tested Washington's continued relevance in a world increasingly defined by multipolarity.

True to his brand as a dealmaker, Trump placed commerce at the center of his visit. Announcements of multibillion-dollar agreements dominated the headlines, ranging from expansive arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to infrastructure investments, technology transfers, and fledgling partnerships in artificial intelligence and renewable energy.

For Trump, the logic was straightforward: These deals promise jobs back home, project strength abroad, and reinforce his campaign narrative of economic nationalism and American exceptionalism.

For Gulf states, Trump's visit reaffirmed their centrality to US strategic calculations. In a region where optics carry geopolitical weight, his presence underscored a clear message: The US is still engaged, and transactional loyalty remains a currency that yields dividends.

Gulf leaders extracted more than symbolism. The visit aligned with their sweeping national agendas, from Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's industrial diversification to Qatar's long-term investments in energy, education, and technology. Trump's endorsement provides political cover for these domestic overhauls, while insulating them from Western scrutiny.

Yet this is not a return to Cold War binaries. Gulf capitals understand the precariousness of relying too heavily on American guarantees, particularly in an era of growing US isolationism. Their strategy is pragmatic: Hedge alliances, broaden partnerships, and deepen autonomy.

Looming behind Trump's Gulf tour was the expanding shadow of China. Over the past decade, Beijing has embedded itself across the region, investing in ports, logistics, digital infrastructure, and energy supply chains. It offers rapid deployment of capital, infrastructure efficiency, and diplomatic noninterference — an attractive alternative to the conditionality of Western engagement.

The Gulf is not forced to choose between Washington and Beijing. It is leveraging both to extract maximum strategic value. Trump's mission was not to displace China but to reassert America's competitive edge by offering what Beijing cannot: elite military capabilities, intelligence-sharing frameworks, and the legacy of long-term security cooperation. The defense and tech-focused agreements signed during this trip signaled a renewed American willingness to contest influence in the region, not relinquish it.



One question haunts the cascade of contracts: How will Gulf states finance these commitments amid persistently low oil prices? Although regional economies have amassed significant sovereign wealth over the past two decades, fiscal pressure is mounting. Budget deficits are widening, subsidy cuts remain politically sensitive, and diversification efforts are still nascent in terms of revenue generation.

The answer, for now, lies in the careful management of reserves, reprioritization of capital spending, and a bet that the return on strategic alignment with the US, in terms of security guarantees and investment access, will outweigh the short-term economic strain. But the risk is real; overextension, particularly in a volatile oil market, could jeopardize long-term fiscal stability and delay domestic reforms agendas.

Although not headline news during the visit, energy politics remained a critical undercurrent. Military alliances and diplomatic alignment invariably shape oil-production strategies. A revitalized US-Gulf relationship could yield informal coordination on output policy, especially in moments of global economic turbulence.

Yet the more profound shift is structural. Gulf economies are accelerating their transitions away from hydrocarbons, altering the very foundations of their relationships with the US. Investment, innovation and industrial collaboration are becoming the new pillars of engagement. This transition will redefine global capital flows, diminish the centrality of the petrodollar, and reshape energy diplomacy for decades to come.

Tactically, the visit delivered results. Trump walked away with deals he can market as economic and diplomatic victories. Gulf leaders secured visibility, AI deals, investment, and a reaffirmation of their strategic relevance.

But deeper uncertainties persist. Many agreements are aspirational or on the long-term horizon and could be derailed by future US policy reversals. Tying regional strategy too tightly to a single, polarizing figure risks instability should the American political landscape shift.

More fundamentally, the visit did not reverse the trajectory of an increasingly multipolar world. The US is now one player in a crowded strategic arena that includes China, Europe, and a rising class of autonomous regional actors.

Trump's Gulf visit reinvigorated a crucial relationship. But it did not end the game. That contest continues to unfold — in Washington, in Beijing, and in the Arab Gulf capitals of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha.

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