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China's Relevance in Gulf Security Amid the US-Israel-Iran Escalation

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The recent escalation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has once again exposed the fragility of the Middle East's security environment and the growing risks of regional spillover. Beyond the immediate military confrontation and its implications for regional stability, the crisis is also accelerating a wider geopolitical trend: the increasing relevance of China in Gulf security calculations and broader Middle Eastern diplomacy.

For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the latest developments reinforce a central strategic concern: the fear that the Gulf could become the primary arena for a prolonged confrontation between Iran, Israel, and external powers. The Gulf's strategic geography places it at the center of critical maritime and energy corridors, making any regional escalation a direct threat to economic stability, energy markets, and trade flows. The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most sensitive chokepoints, and any disruption there carries immediate global consequences. As tensions rise, Gulf states are prioritizing de-escalation, diplomatic containment, and the prevention of a wider regional war.

At the same time, the conflict has highlighted the limits of relying exclusively on traditional security frameworks. While the United States remains the Gulf's principal security partner and military guarantor, GCC states have increasingly pursued more diversified foreign policies aimed at reducing overdependence on any single external actor. This strategic diversification has become a defining feature of Gulf foreign policy over the past decade, reflected in the expansion of ties with Asia, growing engagement with middle powers, and stronger economic and political partnerships with China.

Within this context, China's role in the Gulf is becoming increasingly important, but the recent crisis has also exposed the limitations of Beijing's regional approach. Chinese officials have consistently called for restraint, dialogue, and respect for sovereignty, while avoiding direct involvement in military escalation. Beijing continues to position itself as a relatively neutral actor capable of maintaining relations with all sides simultaneously, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. However, beyond diplomatic statements and calls for de-escalation, China has remained cautious and largely reactive during times of serious regional crises. Its approach continues to prioritize economic connectivity, energy security, and political stability, while avoiding the political and security responsibilities that come with deeper strategic involvement.



The current conflict is thus testing the credibility of China's long-standing posture in the Middle East. China's economic exposure to the region has become increasingly substantial, directly tying regional security developments to Beijing's own strategic and economic interests. As the world's largest importer of Gulf energy and a major trading partner for GCC states, China benefits enormously from regional stability. Beijing also remains the primary buyer of Iranian oil, importing an estimated 1.3 to 1.5 million barrels per day from Iran in recent years, accounting for roughly 85-90 [percent](#) of Iran's total oil exports and approximately 12 percent of China's total crude imports. The Belt and Road Initiative has further deepened Chinese involvement in Gulf infrastructure, logistics, ports, telecommunications, and industrial development. Any disruption to Gulf shipping lanes or energy exports, therefore, carries direct consequences for China's economy and global supply chains.

Despite these growing interests, Beijing continues to approach regional political and security engagement with caution, often prioritizing economic cooperation and diplomatic dialogue over direct security involvement. China has largely operated within a regional security environment historically underpinned by the United States, allowing Beijing to expand its economic and strategic presence while maintaining a relatively limited security footprint. This has prompted ongoing discussions across the region regarding the extent to which China is positioned, or prepared, to contribute more actively to regional stability during periods of heightened tension or crisis. While Gulf states continue to value China's expanding diplomatic and economic role, there is also an emerging expectation that, as Beijing's interests and influence in the region grow, its contribution to preserving regional stability and supporting de-escalation efforts may need to evolve accordingly.

The Saudi-Iran normalization agreement brokered by Beijing in 2023 remains an important diplomatic achievement that helped shape Gulf perceptions of China's regional role. However, the recent escalation has also demonstrated the limits of that mediation success. While China was able to facilitate dialogue between regional rivals during a relatively favorable political moment, managing active military escalation and broader regional crises requires a much higher degree of political engagement, crisis management capacity, and strategic willingness. Beijing has so far shown hesitation to move beyond symbolic diplomacy into more proactive regional leadership.

Importantly, Gulf states do not necessarily expect or want China to replace the United States as the region's primary security actor. Rather, as China's economic and strategic interests in the Middle East continue to expand, there are likely to be



growing expectations regarding Beijing's broader political and diplomatic role. If China seeks to strengthen its position as a major global stakeholder in the region, it may increasingly be encouraged to contribute more actively to areas such as regional stability, maritime security, crisis diplomacy, and conflict prevention, alongside its longstanding emphasis on economic cooperation and balanced engagement. In this context, China and Russia both vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution on the security of the Strait of Hormuz on April 7, 2026. The resolution, submitted by Bahrain alongside Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, aimed to strengthen maritime security and stability in one of the world's most critical trade corridors. For many in the Gulf, such actions are viewed as unconstructive at a time of heightened regional tensions and reinforced broader concerns that major powers often prioritize geopolitical calculations over supporting effective and timely regional crisis management.

Ultimately, the US-Israel-Iran escalation demonstrates that Gulf security dynamics are increasingly interconnected with broader global power competition. For GCC states, managing these shifting dynamics requires balancing strategic partnerships, avoiding regional polarization, and maintaining diplomatic flexibility. Within this evolving landscape, China's role is becoming more relevant, but its current approach also reveals important contradictions. Beijing's growing economic interests in the Gulf require an increasing level of political and strategic engagement. The central question is no longer whether China will remain engaged in the region, but whether it is prepared to assume greater responsibility commensurate with the scale of its interests and ambitions.

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