

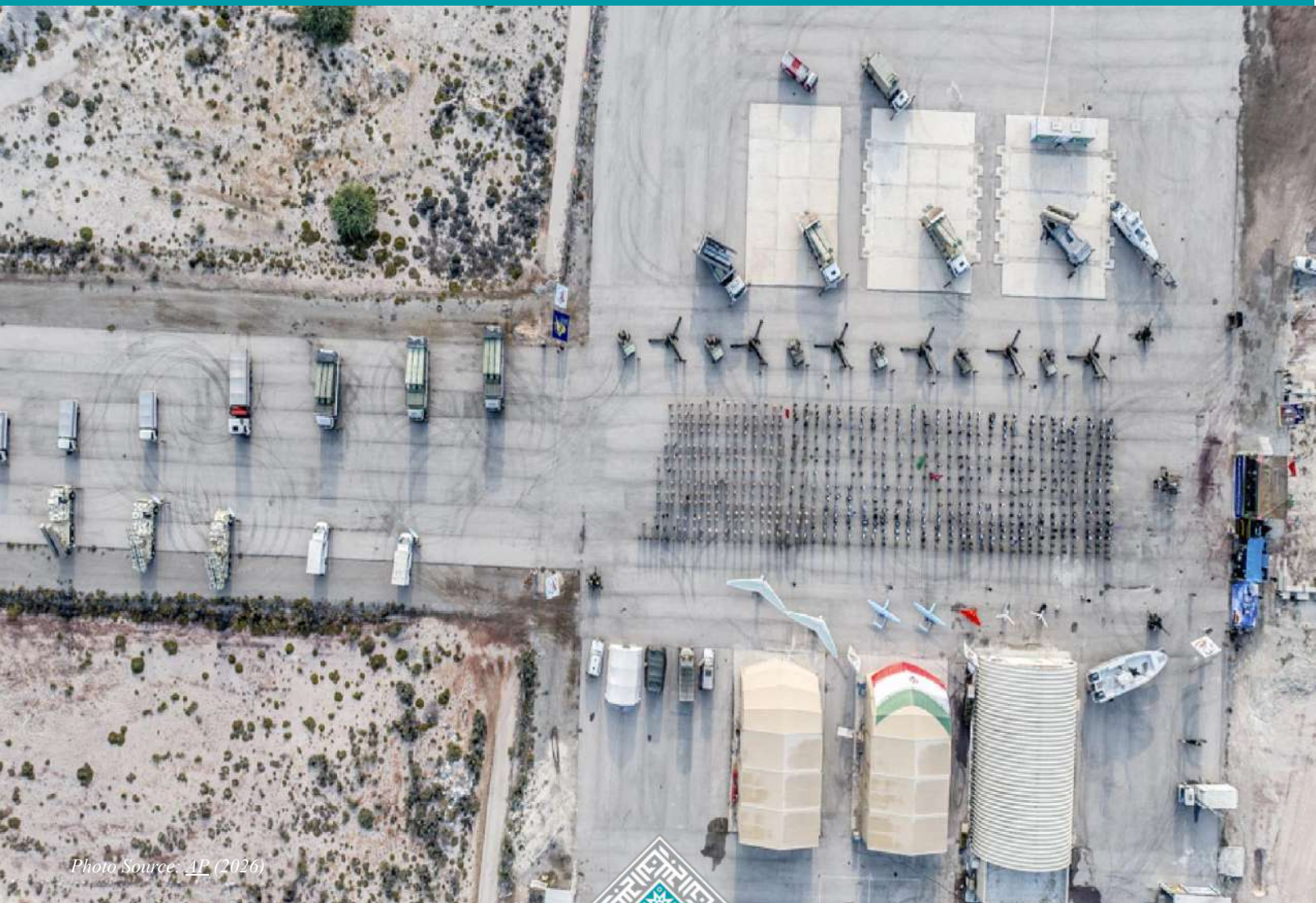


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Asian Partners and Gulf Security: Diverging Responses to Regional Instability

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Asian Partners and Gulf Security: Diverging Responses to Regional Instability

The ongoing U.S.-Iran-Israel conflict is testing some of the assumptions that have underpinned Asia's expanding engagement with the Gulf. Over the past two months, the responses of key Asian partners have reflected differing strategic priorities and approaches to the evolving regional environment. At the same time, there remains broad convergence around the importance of de-escalation, the continuity of energy flows, and freedom of navigation. The principal differences lie in the extent to which individual actors are positioned, and prepared, to contribute to shaping the regional security environment.

China: Diplomatic Influence, Strategic Restraint

For China, the crisis represents perhaps the clearest test yet of its claim to be a consequential Middle Eastern diplomatic actor. Beijing's strategic interests remain substantial: stable energy supplies, protection of Belt and Road connectivity, expanding economic ties with the GCC, preservation of its partnership with Iran, and ensuring that China retains a meaningful role in an evolving regional diplomatic landscape. Following the June 2026 U.S.-Iran memorandum, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi congratulated Pakistan on facilitating the first-phase MoU and "stressed that working for peace is an international responsibility shared by all countries, including China and Pakistan." Wang Yi also stated that China would continue supporting Islamabad's mediation efforts while playing a constructive role "in its own way." Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian publicly welcomed the agreement and reiterated that China stands ready to work with the international community to continue playing a constructive role in restoring peace and stability to the Middle East and the Gulf region.

Beijing subsequently remained diplomatically engaged: On July 16, 2026, during a meeting in Shanghai between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, the two sides coordinated their positions on Iran, called for the resumption of U.S.-Iran dialogue, and explicitly backed Pakistan's mediation efforts. These efforts built on China's earlier diplomatic role in the region, most notably its hosting and sponsorship of the March 2023 Saudi-Iran agreement restoring diplomatic relations, which had strengthened expectations that Beijing could use its relationship with Tehran to contribute to regional stability.



Photo Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China](#) (2026)

Yet the crisis has also demonstrated the limits of China's willingness to translate its substantial economic and diplomatic interests into a direct regional security role. This is particularly visible in maritime security. China depends heavily on Middle Eastern energy supplies, yet rather than assuming responsibility for securing the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el-Mandeb, Chinese state-controlled shipping companies have increasingly adapted commercially to the deterioration in security. By late July 2026, COSCO Shipping Energy Transportation and China Merchants Energy Shipping had stopped sending their oil tankers through Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, instead [arranging](#) loadings and ship-to-ship transfers outside the Gulf, particularly off Oman and the UAE. This response illustrates Beijing's broader preference for managing its exposure to regional instability while continuing to advocate diplomacy rather than assuming the military responsibilities associated with guaranteeing freedom of navigation.

This does not mean China's strategy has failed. Beijing has preserved relations with virtually every major actor while avoiding the political and military costs associated with direct involvement. It has also supported Pakistan's intermediary role in attempts to revive U.S.-Iran diplomacy.



But the conflict has exposed a fundamental contradiction: China wants the diplomatic benefits of being considered a major regional power without accepting the security liabilities that accompany such a role. The contrast is particularly visible in the maritime domain. In April 2026, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [stated](#) that “the safety of shipping lanes, as well as energy and infrastructure facilities, should also be safeguarded.” China has similarly advocated resolving Gulf security challenges through political and diplomatic means, including through a regional multilateral dialogue platform that takes into account the security concerns of all parties. Yet Beijing has not translated these declaratory positions into operational guarantees or direct security commitments. This gap is particularly striking given China’s dependence on Gulf energy, its strategic partnership with Iran, its close relationship with Pakistan, and its role in facilitating the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement. Beijing therefore remains indispensable economically but less decisive strategically than some GCC states may previously have assumed.

India: Strategic Balance and Cautious Engagement

India’s approach has remained notably measured, reflecting the complexity of its interests across both the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Since the outbreak of the conflict, New Delhi has consistently called for restraint, de-escalation, and a return to dialogue and diplomacy, while seeking to maintain its established relationships with the GCC states, Iran, Israel, and the United States. In its 28 February 2026 statement, for example, India urged all parties to “exercise restraint, avoid escalation” and pursue diplomacy. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar subsequently reiterated this position before Parliament on 9 March 2026, identifying peace, dialogue, the security of Indian nationals, energy security, and trade flows as the principal considerations shaping India’s approach. India has also placed particular emphasis on freedom of navigation, when Parvathaneni Harish, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations delivered a statement in New York on April 2026, telling the UN General Assembly that attacks on commercial shipping and impediments to navigation through the Strait of Hormuz were unacceptable.

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, signed by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Türkiye on 7 August 2026, introduces an additional strategic consideration for New Delhi given Pakistan’s participation. The agreement establishes a collective-defence principle while providing for closer political and military coordination, joint exercises, and cooperation in areas such as defence technology, cyber capabilities, and unmanned systems. However, its operational implications are yet to be defined



and the parties have presented the framework as defensive rather than as a substitute for existing partnerships.

India is therefore likely to assess the agreement carefully, particularly the extent to which its collective-defence provisions could intersect with South Asian security dynamics. This would be consistent with New Delhi's response to the September 2025 Saudi-Pakistan bilateral defence agreement, which stated that it would [examine](#) the implications for India's national security and regional and global stability.

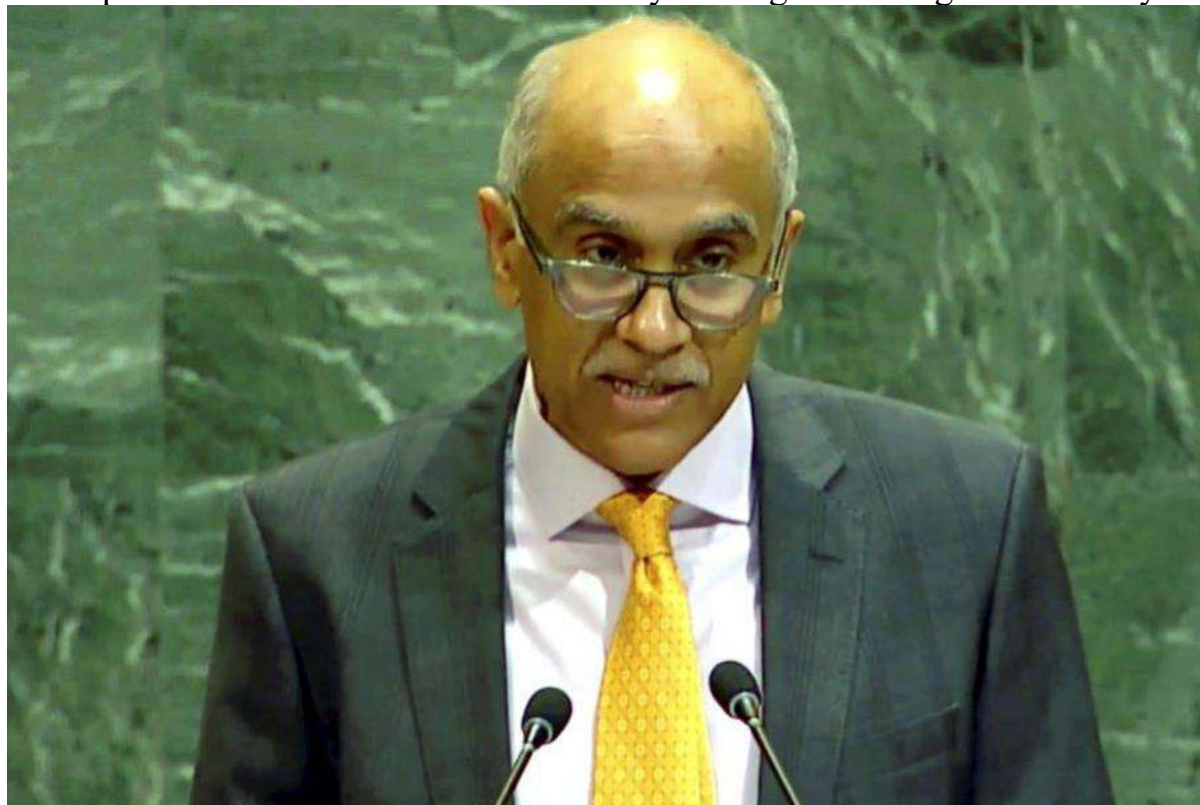


Photo Source: [Telegraph India](#) (2026)

At the same time, India has strong incentives to prevent these concerns from affecting its expanding strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and the wider GCC. India-Saudi cooperation now encompasses political, defence, security, energy, trade, investment, and technology ties, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 2025 visit further institutionalising defence cooperation through a dedicated ministerial committee under the Strategic Partnership Council.

India's response is therefore likely to emphasise quiet diplomatic engagement and strategic reassurance rather than public opposition. New Delhi will seek greater clarity on the agreement's practical scope while preserving its strong ties with Riyadh and other Gulf capitals and, where possible, preventing emerging Gulf



security arrangements from becoming entangled in longstanding South Asian rivalries. This balancing act is complicated by India's participation in a looser transactional network involving the UAE and Israel, with links extending into the Horn of Africa through cooperation in ports, maritime access, surveillance, intelligence, and defence technology. While not a formal defence alliance, this emerging alignment may overlap uneasily with the Saudi-Türkiye-Pakistan framework. India must therefore manage its involvement carefully to avoid reinforcing competing security blocs that could complicate GCC coordination and impede efforts to develop an integrated regional security architecture.

Japan and South Korea: Economic Security and Maritime Stability

Japan and South Korea, by comparison, illustrate how immediate economic vulnerability is shaping Asian responses to the conflict. Both have increasingly linked Gulf security to energy security and the stability of critical maritime routes. Japan has placed particular emphasis on freedom of navigation, connecting GCC cooperation with resilient energy and critical-material supply chains at the first Japan-GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue on June 9, 2026, which convened virtually to review ongoing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations and share national trade.

By August 12, 2026, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was directly urging Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to support safe navigation through Hormuz and encourage Houthi restraint in the Bab el-Mandeb, while Tokyo condemned attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure and tankers. Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi also travelled to Saudi Arabia and Oman from August 17 to August 22 to reaffirm cooperation towards the early de-escalation of the situation and ensuring the free and safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

South Korea has pursued a similar approach with a stronger focus on energy resilience, welcoming the June U.S.-Iran agreement while maintaining domestic fuel-price measures and strengthening contingency arrangements with Gulf producers. Its July 2026 agreement with the UAE's ADNOC expanded long-term crude supply, emergency coordination, and strategic stockpiling, alongside efforts by Korean refiners to diversify supplies beyond the Middle East. For both countries, these measures reflect less a strategic realignment than a growing recognition that their economic security is increasingly tied to stability in the Gulf and its surrounding maritime corridors. The partnership builds on earlier energy cooperation, including the UAE's March commitment to provide South Korea with up to 24 million barrels of oil, and was unveiled during a visit to Seoul by Sultan Al-



Jaber, ADNOC Group CEO and the UAE's Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology.

A further question is whether these shared interests will translate into a more active security role. Both Japan and South Korea already maintain a limited naval presence in the wider region. Japan's Self-Defense Forces conduct counter-piracy and maritime-surveillance operations in the Gulf of Aden, the northern Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Oman, while its renewed defence cooperation with Oman includes logistical support for Japanese vessels. South Korea's Cheonghae Unit has similarly undertaken escort and anti-piracy missions and has previously extended its operational area to the Strait of Hormuz. Nevertheless, neither government has publicly committed to a new combat deployment or participation in a broader military coalition in response to the conflict. Their approach continues to favour independent information-gathering, vessel protection, logistical cooperation, and coordination with regional partners. This suggests that any expanded role is likely to remain defensive and carefully calibrated, reflecting domestic legal and political constraints as well as a desire to protect relations with both Gulf states and Iran. Unlike China, however, Japan and South Korea's alliances with the United States may expose them to greater pressure to contribute operationally if maritime insecurity persists.



Photo Source: [Arab News](#) (2026)



GCC-Asia Relations: Toward More Strategic Interdependence

The conflict is reinforcing rather than weakening the strategic logic of GCC-Asia relations because diversification cannot eliminate Asian exposure to Gulf instability. China can reroute tankers, South Korea can seek alternative suppliers, and Japan can strengthen supply-chain resilience, but the Gulf remains too important to Asian energy consumption and maritime trade to be insulated from regional disruption. The result is a dual response: Asian states are reducing the risks associated with dependence on particular routes while deepening engagement with GCC states whose energy production, infrastructure, and geographic position remain difficult to substitute.

At the same time, the crisis shows that deeper engagement will not produce a uniform Asian security role. China remains reluctant to assume direct responsibility for maritime security, India must balance Gulf engagement against its wider regional interests, and Japan and South Korea are approaching Gulf security primarily through economic and energy-security considerations. This gives the GCC an opportunity to pursue different forms of cooperation with different Asian partners rather than seeking a single alternative security provider. In this sense, strategic autonomy comes not from replacing existing partnerships, but from widening the range of partners and capabilities on which Gulf states can draw.

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