

## CHAPTER 10

# SECURITY PROVIDER NO MORE

How the Gulf is redefining alliances  
amid America's retreat

by  
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Confidence in the US as a security guarantor among Gulf states did not collapse; it eroded, quietly but steadily. Gulf leaders read the signals early – earlier, in fact, than the European Union. While Obama's remarks about 'free riders' <sup>(1)</sup> and the widely discussed 'pivot to Asia' <sup>(2)</sup> may have been aimed at Europe, it was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that took the message to heart <sup>(3)</sup>. They saw what lay ahead: a future in which Washington would be less committed, less predictable, and increasingly transactional. In response, Gulf monarchies began hedging: diversifying their diplomatic and economic relationships with a growing roster of global powers, even when those moves ran counter to US expectations.

Under Trump 2.0, Gulf states see an expanded window of opportunity: an isolationist, business-oriented White House less concerned with ideological loyalties and more receptive to deal-making. While

each country navigates this environment differently, the overall effect has been to embolden the Gulf to play a more assertive role regionally and globally. For the EU, this shifting landscape opens space to step out of Washington's shadow and pursue its own interests in the Gulf and broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: clearly and consistently, but without the short-term transnationalism that defines the US approach.

## A DROP AT A TIME: THE SLOW EROSION OF TRUST

Trust in the strength of the US–GCC relationship has steadily unravelled over the past four US administrations. Gulf leaders

(1) Goldberg, J., 'The Obama doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>).

(2) 'Barack Obama says Asia-Pacific is "top US priority"', BBC News, 17 November 2011 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15715446>).

(3) Al-Faisal, T., 'Mr. Obama, we are not "free riders"', Arab News, 14 March 2016 (<https://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826>).

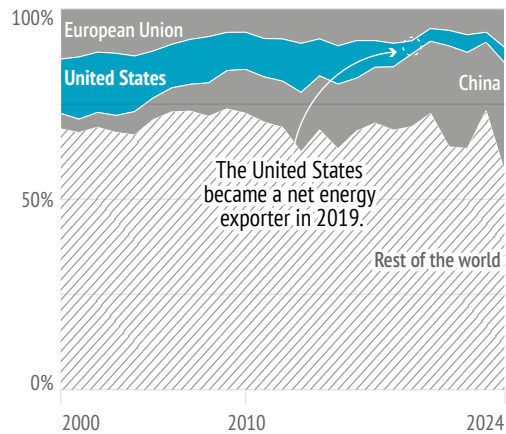
increasingly see Washington as strategically retreating from the region while pursuing policies that are more and more unpredictable and transactional.

Tensions began to mount during the Obama years, when the US distanced itself from longtime ally Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 uprising, engaged with Iran, and maintained a non-interventionist stance in Syria. Efforts to reassure alarmed Gulf partners<sup>(4)</sup> – such as the 2015 Camp David summit – fell short of the formal security guarantees the GCC leaders sought. Donald Trump's first term initially marked a reset. His 2017 visit to Riyadh, record arms deals and withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 aligned closely with GCC preferences at the time. However, trust unravelled again in 2019 due to Washington's muted response to attacks (widely attributed to Iran) on Saudi infrastructure, which reinforced doubts about US commitment, especially as America's new status as a net energy exporter reduced its incentive to secure Middle Eastern oil flows<sup>(5)</sup>. Biden's early moves – freezing arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE and labelling the Saudi Crown Prince a 'pariah' – followed by disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, further strained ties. Attempts to re-engage during the 2022 energy crisis, sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, were seen as transactional.

Trump's return to office was broadly welcomed by Gulf leaders, who saw in his second term the prospect of renewed partnership. And at first, the US-Gulf relationship appeared to thrive. The

## Weakening ties

Volume of GCC exports of energy by recipient, %



Data: UNCOMTRADE, 2025

President's first foreign trip (following the funeral of Pope Francis) was to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, where he was received with grand fanfare and unveiled a series of deals and investment pledges (amounting in total to \$2 trillion according to the White House<sup>(6)</sup>). The visit also delivered a breakthrough on Syria: in a surprise move, Trump met with Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa in Riyadh and announced the lifting of US sanctions. For Saudi Arabia, this was a major win, reinforcing its bid to reassert influence in Damascus. Yet trust remained fragmented. The 12-day war between Israel and Iran underscored US unpredictability: Trump shifted from ruling out US involvement<sup>(7)</sup> to authorising limited strikes on Iranian nuclear sites, before swiftly imposing a ceasefire. Washington's inability – or unwillingness – to prevent the Israeli strike on Qatar in September 2025 may have dealt the final

(4) Ulrichsen, K. C., 'Transactional politics: Rethinking U.S.-Gulf security and defence relationships amid U.S. decline', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 0, No. 0, 2025 (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/03043754251347671>).

(5) US Energy Information Administration, 'US energy facts – imports and exports' (<https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/imports-and-exports.php>).

(6) The White House, 'Fact sheets' (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/page/7/>).

(7) 'US tells Israel it won't take part in any Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities', Reuters, 12 June 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-tells-israel-it-wont-take-part-any-israeli-strike-irans-nuclear-facilities-2025-06-12/>).

blow to already frayed Gulf confidence in the sturdiness of the US security umbrella.

## PLAYING TO STRENGTH

With US reliability in doubt, GCC states have diversified their approaches while still relying on American arms and intelligence. Their recalibrated foreign policy agendas are increasingly driven by pragmatism, ambition, and a desire for greater autonomy. At the same time, individual states are playing to their specific strengths and seizing opportunities emerging from an increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape.

A clear display of their more assertive posture came in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, resisted US calls to boost oil production, prioritising economic self-interest over alliance politics. The coordinated OPEC+ decisions to cut output in late 2022 and again in 2023, alongside their broadly neutral stance on the war, reflected a growing willingness to defy US expectations. This position unsettled Washington, which was unaccustomed to such independent manoeuvring from traditional partners<sup>(8)</sup>. For the GCC, the Ukraine war has become a testing ground for navigating great power competition, testing their ability to strike a balance between Western alliances and ties with Russia. It has also provided leverage to

renegotiate terms of engagement with the US, while maintaining dialogue with Moscow, whose involvement in Syria and Iran continues to pose risks to Gulf security.

Another example of the GCC's strategic adaptation has been a newfound willingness to engage diplomatically with Iran. The restrained US response to the 2019 attacks on Saudi and Emirati oil and maritime infrastructure prompted both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to quietly reconsider their approach to Tehran. What followed was a slow but deliberate pivot: the recognition that de-escalation and selective economic engagement with Iran could offer a more sustainable path to regional stability.

In Saudi Arabia's case, this shift culminated in the restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran in March 2023. While

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Oman played a discreet but pivotal role in facilitating early dialogue, the final breakthrough was formalised in Beijing, with China stepping in as the public broker. Allowing China to take credit was no coincidence. It sent a deliberate signal that Gulf states are broadening their diplomatic partnerships and increasingly looking beyond

traditional Western interlocutors. This move also reflected the deepening economic ties between the Gulf and China. In recent years, China has become the leading trade partner for Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and ranks among the top five for Bahrain and Oman<sup>(9)</sup>. It has also overtaken both the EU and the US as the largest destination for Gulf oil and gas exports – a shift that underscores how economic interdependence is reinforcing strategic engagement. By 2024, nearly

(8) Parker, T.B. and Bakir, A., 'Strategic shifts in the Gulf: GCC Defence diversification amidst US decline', *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2024 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03932729.2024.2409243>).

(9) European Commission, 'EU trade policy – statistics' ([https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/analysis-and-assessment/statistics\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/analysis-and-assessment/statistics_en)).

30% of GCC energy exports by volume were directed to China<sup>(10)</sup>. This growing connectivity is part of the GCC's own 'pivot to Asia', which has seen Gulf states expand trade and investment relationships with other major Asian economies, including India, South Korea and Japan.

At the same time, Gulf states are far from uniform in how they navigate shifting great power rivalries and their evolving relationship with the US. The UAE has leaned into diversification, joining the BRICS group in 2024 'despite its positioning as a challenge to the US-led global order. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, has held back from accepting the invitation to join the BRICS bloc, wary of straining ties with Washington – although the recent Israeli strike on Qatar pushed Riyadh toward a more assertive step: signing a mutual defence pact with Pakistan. On Israel, despite US pressure, Riyadh has ruled out joining the Abraham Accords while the Gaza war continues<sup>(11)</sup>, conditioning normalisation on the creation of a Palestinian state (although without pressing forcefully for an end to the conflict). Abu Dhabi, meanwhile, has criticized Israeli actions but maintained its relations and commitment to the Accords.

Within the MENA region itself, Gulf leaders are navigating a shifting balance of power while weighing the US-Israeli relationship against their own interests. Trump's decision to bypass Israel, during his first foreign trip in May 2025, alongside his willingness to sidestep Israeli preferences in pursuit of transactional outcomes, did not go unnoticed among the Gulf leaders. The administration's direct outreach

to the Houthis and backchannel contacts with Hamas signalled a shift in priorities.

While the strategic interests of Israel and the Gulf monarchies often overlap, divergences remain – and in those moments, a quiet competition for Washington's ear

has become apparent. This was particularly evident during the 12-day war and in the context of US-led efforts to revive negotiations with Iran, which were broadly welcomed by Gulf states but firmly rejected by Israel. In the end, neither side was fully satisfied with the outcome. More recently, following the Israeli strike on

Qatar, the balance initially appeared to tilt in Israel's favour: the operation, apparently undertaken without US foreknowledge (or immediate pushback) signalled an early Israeli advantage. Soon after, however, Qatar obtained a security guarantee issued by presidential executive order, accompanied by a public apology from Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered at the White House. Taken together, these episodes underscored two key dynamics: the unpredictability of US foreign policy and the growing assertiveness of Gulf actors, as illustrated by Saudi Arabia's swift conclusion of a defence pact with Pakistan in the wake of the strike.

Amid these tensions, growing scepticism among Trump's isolationist base about the value of continued US aid to Israel – amounting to more than \$130 billion between 1948 and 2025<sup>(12)</sup> – and increasing disdain for 'forever wars', gave Gulf leaders an opening to frame themselves as net contributors to US prosperity, rather than strategic liabilities.

## **Gulf states are far from uniform in how they navigate their evolving relationship with the US.**

(10) UN Comtrade, 'UN Comtrade Plus database' (<https://comtradeplus.un.org>).

(11) As this publication went to press, the Trump administration had brokered a ceasefire in Gaza.

(12) US Department of State, 'US Security Cooperation with Israel', 25 April 2025 (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-israel>).

Syria presents another point of divergence. Gulf states, led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have pushed for re-engagement with Damascus and successfully lobbied Trump to lift sanctions, arguing that regional stability depends on Syria's reintegration. Meanwhile, Israel continues to carry out strikes on Syrian territory, although arguably it is US pressure that restrains it from launching more extensive operations.

On defence cooperation, Trump's May 2025 visit to the Gulf resulted in a wave of new arms deals. In previous years, proposed sales of advanced F-35 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia and Qatar were blocked to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), a long-standing pillar of US policy<sup>(13)</sup>. However, Israel now faces growing unease. Trump has already demonstrated a willingness to override established norms and legal safeguards when politically expedient, and Gulf leaders appear more confident in their ability to secure deals that had long been off the table.

## CATCHING UP IN THE GULF

Where does all this leave the EU? First, in contrast to the US, the EU can position itself as a stable and predictable partner, committed to multilateralism, international cooperation, and long-term engagement. There is space for deeper cooperation with the GCC where interests already align, or can be brought into alignment, particularly in areas where Washington shows limited interest such as decarbonisation and the energy transition, humanitarian and

development aid, as well as expanding research and academic collaboration<sup>(14)</sup>.

The transformation of Gulf-US ties, combined with a widening transatlantic rift and growing distrust between Brussels and Washington, opens the door for a re-imagined EU-Gulf partnership. The EU should move beyond its habit of aligning its Gulf and regional policy with that of the US and instead pursue an independent, value- and interest-driven strategy. The Gulf states have long viewed 'the West' as a monolithic bloc. Now is the time for the EU to step out from under that umbrella. The forthcoming New Pact for the Mediterranean and planned EU Middle East strategy will be the real tests of whether the EU can position itself not merely as a transatlantic bridge or part of the Western consensus, but as a capable and autonomous actor with distinct goals, principles and policies.

Finally, the EU can also draw lessons from how the GCC manages its ties with Washington. First, it should hedge strategically: stay close to the US but build real alternatives with partners such as the GCC, India, Canada and Japan, so cooperation with Washington is a choice rather than a dependency. Second, it should make Europe's value measurable: like the GCC presenting itself as a net contributor, the EU should regularly highlight its impact on US jobs, investment, energy security and defence cooperation. Finally, engage all US power centres. Rather than seeing Washington as a monolithic centre of power, the EU should follow the Gulf countries in investing in long-term ties across Congress, state governments, industry, and think tanks to insulate against changes in presidential administrations.

(13) Congressional Research Service, 'Arms sales in the Middle East: Trends and analytical perspectives for US policy' (<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R444984>).

(14) Sidlo, K., 'Calibrated engagement: Evolving relations between the EU and the Gulf region', Brief No.18, EUISS, July 2025 (<https://www.eiss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/calibrated-engagement-evolving-relations-between-eu-and-gulf-region>).