



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Tenth Round

Gulf Studies Forum

2-3 December 2023

Round Topics

1. Relations between Gulf States and China: Continuity or Transformation?
2. Cultural Policies of the Arab Gulf States

Concept Note



The tenth round of the Gulf Studies Forum, to be held on 2-3 December 2023, will first address the theme of "Relations between the Gulf States and China" in its international relations track, then "Cultural Policies of the Arab Gulf States" in its domestic affairs track.

Track I - Relations between Gulf States and China: Continuity or Transformation?

During the Cold War, Arab Gulf states' relations with China were subject to the ideological and geopolitical division that defined the post-World War II international order. China's support for leftist movements that sought to overthrow conservative US-allied Gulf regimes had negative repercussions for bilateral relations, the development of which was further impeded by China's backing of the Dhofar rebellion and the so-called "Front for the Liberation of the Arab Gulf", and Beijing's close ties with the Marxist regime in South Yemen. Hence, it was only after US-Chinese rapprochement came underway in the early 1970s, taking advantage of the growing rift between China and the Soviet Union, that the People's Republic of China's relations with some Arab Gulf states began to improve. For other states, it took until the end of the Cold War. Although China has unilaterally recognized Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE since 1971,⁽¹⁾ Kuwait was the first Gulf state to establish diplomatic relations with China, in March 1971, followed by Oman in May 1978, the UAE in November 1984, Qatar in July 1988, Bahrain in April 1989, and Saudi Arabia in July 1990.⁽²⁾

The end of the Cold War and China's integration into the international liberal economic order, such as the World Trade Organization, as well as the major economic revival it has experienced in the past three decades as reflected in increasing energy demands to meet its industrial needs, led to the emergence of major common interests between China and the Gulf states.⁽³⁾ Since then, both parties have grown more interested in developing bilateral relations, whether economically, politically, culturally, or otherwise.⁽⁴⁾

Yet the sprawling course of Gulf-China relations started to encounter increasing challenges resulting from the international system, as Washington's perspective on China shifted from that of a friendly state whose assimilation into the world economic order it had supported, beginning with Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, into a strategic competitor and adversary. The American national security strategy argued that China is the greatest challenge facing the United States following the decline of terrorism during the term of former President Barack Obama (2009-2017), who launched the "Pivot to Asia" policy. Through the changes in administrations (Donald Trump and Joe Biden) over the past decade, the United States has continued to regard China – on the rise economically, technologically, and militarily – as the greatest geostrategic challenge to its global hegemony, especially in the Indian and Pacific Oceans region.⁽⁵⁾

1 Hikmat Alabdulrahman, *China and the Middle East: A Historical Study on China's Evolving Position toward the Arab Region Post-Cold War* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 43-44.

2 "al-'Alāqāt al-Šīniyya – al-'Arabiyya fī Khamsa wa-Sittīn 'Āman", *China Today*, 21/06/2021, accessed on 01/03/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3kCri2Q>

3 Manochehr Dorraj, "China's Relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia: Policies of Sensitive Balance", in: I-wei Jennifer Chang et al., *The Arabs and China: The Future of Relations with a Rising Power* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019), p. 482.

4 Jonathan Fulton, "'One Belt, One Road' and the GCC", in: Chang et al., pp. 281-282.

5 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance", The White House (March 2021), accessed on 17/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2Z1QxRo>



Perhaps the tensions afflicting US-China relations, and their various causes, are superficial expressions of this new relationship. The US takes as a given that China is its most prominent geopolitical challenge, accusing it of trying to change the liberal world order established after World War II and create "a world in which might makes right and winners take all".⁽⁶⁾ Meanwhile, Beijing realizes that the US is working diligently to contain it, limit its international influence, and restrict its movement in the South China Sea, which China considers an economic zone all its own; Washington's policy on the region is part of why Beijing has seen tensions in its relations with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Several factors have come together to create the image of China emerging as a major power to confront the US, most prominently China's economic prowess. It is ranked second worldwide, after the US, in gross domestic product, which reached USD 17.94 trillion in 2021, and the largest in terms of purchasing power parity,⁽⁷⁾ apart from an annual growth rate that surpasses its American counterpart. All this demonstrates that China is quickening its pace to become the largest economy in the world, especially after gradually opening up its economy and adopting industrial policies to stimulate local industrialization and foreign exports. China has become one of the most important industrial regions in the world, positioning it to spark a fundamental transformation in the global mode of industrialization and commerce which emerged in the 20th century. Thus, China has put forward several major strategic initiatives, notably the Belt and Road Initiative which it launched in 2013 to strengthen its economic and commercial leadership worldwide. An ambitious project costing more than one trillion US dollars, spanning countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe,⁽⁸⁾ the initiative would make Beijing Washington's foremost competitor – not only economically, but in terms of influence on international politics as well.

Although China's rise creates a strategic dilemma for the US, there are several reasons why, for the Arab Gulf states, it represents a challenge on the one hand and an opportunity on the other. This rise comes in the context of these states' historical relationship with the US, whereby they are traditionally considered allies of Washington, their main defence partner. Yet the Gulf states also enjoy broad economic relationships with China, now their main trade partner. The trade exchange between China and the GCC amounts to around USD 200 billion, and China is now the primary destination for several Gulf states' oil exports. By contrast, their relationship with the US is defined by the latter having emerged as a competitor in the energy sector, especially after the oil and shale gas revolution that made the US the world's largest producer of gas and oil – to say nothing of its conflict with (some) Gulf states over oil prices and the continual demand of these countries (which command a leading position in OPEC) to set a production and export ceiling. Moreover, the Gulf states' relationship(s) with the US experienced fluctuations and disagreements during the Obama administration, especially in relation to abandoning the regime of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the 25 January 2011 revolution and Obama's attempt at rapprochement with Iran. The Trump administration saw

6 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting", *U.S. Department of State*, 18/3/2021, accessed on 5/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3cMaKP7>

7 For more, see: "GDP, PPP (current international \$)", *World Bank*, accessed on 03/04/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3lST17w>

8 "Belt and Road Initiative: China-Middle East Cooperation in an Age of Geopolitical Turbulence", *Brookings Doha Center*, 16-17/12/2019, accessed on 05/04/2021, at: <https://brook.gs/39EDwPK>



conflicts of a different variety with the Gulf states, particularly Trump's indifferent responses to attacks against Saudi Arabia, and these disputes continue to cast a shadow on US-Gulf relations (most prominently the disaffection in US-Saudi relations under the Biden administration).

Conversely, Gulf relations with China have experienced notable developments that culminated in the China-GCC Summit held in Riyadh in December 2022,⁽⁹⁾ which Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman described as "historic", and which concluded with the signing of bilateral strategic partnership agreements. This relationship has not been limited to the energy sector; in the past decade, the share of Chinese weapons exports to certain Gulf states has increased markedly, to the alarm of the US, which has gotten involved to limit this trade.

The developments of recent years (China's rise as a key power alongside the US, the faltering of GCC relations with Washington, and the stable economic and energy relationship between Gulf states and Beijing) have led the Gulf states to seek a kind of balance between their security interests that remain linked to the US and their growing economic interests with China, while simultaneously resisting what appear to be attempts to push them to choose between the two in light of heightening international polarization between Beijing and Washington.

While there is no doubt that the Gulf states' opening to China may be linked to particular economic factors, it cannot be separated from developments in Gulf-US relations and the consequences of the Trump era. Several Gulf convictions have been shaken, especially the idea of the United States as the guarantor of Gulf security after it was unable to protect them from attacks that Iran is believed to have perpetrated. There have also been signs that the Gulf states are losing their political significance as the US succeeds in transitioning into the world's largest energy producer.

The latest indication that the Gulf's turn toward China could have something to do with the wavering of US relations is the largest Gulf state, Saudi Arabia, seeking to resume relations with its regional adversary, Iran, under Chinese mediation, then agreeing to become a "dialogue partner" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a step toward full membership.

Hence, if the Gulf states' opening to China can be understood as an attempt to pressure the US, it is surely part of their efforts to reshape their relationship with Washington and to open up to other world powers, even though China cannot be a strategic alternative to the US in the Gulf.

Therefore, the theme that the ACRPS will address in the first track of the tenth-annual Gulf Studies Forum is the Gulf states' relationship with China: is it possible to speak of "Gulf-China relations", or must one discuss the relations of individual Gulf states with China? Further, could the development in some Gulf states' ties with China be a mere response to the faltering relations with the US, or does it have a firm economic basis that transcends the logic of reaction? What are the policies that Gulf states are enacting (or are likely to enact) against this backdrop? To what extent will economics and oil inform their strategic choices in relations with China and

9 "Xi Jinping's Visit to Saudi Arabia and Prospects for Relations with China", *Situation Assessment*, ACRPS, 22/12/2022, accessed on 02/04/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3nDIHdl>



the US, and will these factors produce strategic/political choices? That is, is China's strategic vision for the Gulf still limited to commercial exchange, or has it expanded to include political dimensions? Can (some) Gulf states perform the role of mediator between China and the United States, and can it be said that the two are engaged in a competition over the Gulf? How might we interpret the development of Gulf-China relations at the same time that China-Iran relations have seen unprecedented advancement? Does the relationship between the Gulf states and China have cultural or social dimensions, apart from politics and economics?

These questions may be clarified through the following themes:

- Is there an independent dynamic to the evolution of Gulf-China relations?
- Relations of individual Gulf states with China
- The American factor and the development of Gulf-China relations
- The limits and dynamics of US-China competition over the Gulf: challenges and opportunities for the region's states
- Prospects for Gulf mediation between China and the US
- Is there competition between Gulf states over ties with China?
- If there is competition, how do the Gulf states approach it? Do they have a single approach, or several?
- Gulf-China relations in light of China's rise within the international order
- The effect of Gulf-China relations on the rise of China and the structure of the international order
- The effect of Gulf-China relations on the regional order
- The Gulf and the Belt and Road Initiative
- The durability and scope of Gulf-China relations in the economic and energy sectors
- Chinese weapons exports to the Gulf and consequences for the region's arms race
- The political consequences of Gulf-China economic relations
- The repercussions of Gulf-China relations on intra-Gulf relations
- Historical and cultural dimensions of Gulf-China relations
- China in Gulf political, media, and academic discourse
- The Gulf in Chinese political, media, and academic discourse
- Chinese and Gulf public opinion about Gulf-China relations
- The future of Gulf-China relations

Track II - Cultural Policies of the Arab Gulf States

Culture (in the general anthropological sense, not the narrow definition that limits it to artistic and literary production) is inseparable from, if not at the heart of, nation-building processes; after a political entity is defined on this basis, it begins searching for (or producing) cultural content. Nationalism theorists, therefore, give culture (e.g., values, symbols, meanings) a central role in these processes.



The Arab Gulf states have sought to manage the question of culture since their independence – and even prior to that when central authority began taking shape – and this process moved forward in parallel with the solidification of the state. It was, however, a difficult process, and we lack sufficient literature that critically evaluates how Gulf states manage the cultural sphere, not to mention the particularities of the issue in the Gulf context.

It can be argued that the Gulf states face a set of problems related to the cultural issue:

- First (and most importantly), there is the issue of similarity and difference, or the extent to which the culture of Gulf states resembles other cultures that have much in common with each other, the limits of their particularity and divergence from other cultures, and thus, the symbolic (and political) expressions they employ to distinguish themselves. In the Arab world, the countries of the Mashreq have had a leading role in defining the content of Arab culture. The Gulf states have, since their establishment, made use of the established frameworks of Arab culture and taken care to demonstrate their "symmetry" with this culture as an essential part of belonging. Yet they also have their own cultural particularities – lifestyles, heritage, customs, symbols, and so on – which they have sought to showcase and symbolically enclose at various stages of development.
- Second, the display of distinctiveness expanded after the Gulf countries became home to a large migration movement aimed at finding work in these wealthy, oil-rich countries starting in the 1960s and 70s. This movement reached such an extent that the citizens of some of these countries have become demographic minorities. Here, another issue emerges: diversity and distinction are no longer directed toward the traditional incubators of Arab culture but also toward internal demographics that include migrants of various backgrounds, bringing their cultures, values, and symbols, who represent a majority of the population. The issue of cultural gatekeeping takes on a second dimension as citizenship, due to the wealth of the Gulf states, became a privilege.
- Third, this new demographic structure (perhaps unusual for other Arab states) and its associated requirements (especially the demand for education in foreign languages) have created an issue relating to one of these countries' most important cultural pillars: language. The Arabic language has found itself clashing with other more competitive languages (notably English), disrupting its position in a way unparalleled in other Arab countries.
- Fourth, the Gulf countries saw the emergence of a strong central state after independence that undertook a process of habituating society to its nascent power as the primary, central authority. In so doing, the state was supported by a rentier economy of abundance by which it managed the distribution of social benefits. Although space does not permit delving into this issue, despite being of great importance for reimagining Gulf societies outside of the "tribal" label, an awareness of this factor is nevertheless crucial to understand that the state has come to dominate social debates in the Gulf (harbours, coastal cities, deserts, business elites, bureaucrats, etc.). Therefore, the state's management of the cultural issue does not entail the triumph of one social class or its culture and symbols over another, so much as it expresses a somewhat performative formula that the state carries out.



- Fifth, the Gulf states have become markedly under the influence of globalization due to their openness to the West, perhaps more so than other Arab societies. Over the past four decades, several Gulf cities have developed rapidly into major world attractions that feature cutting-edge architectural styles, cultural institutions, and the latest accoutrements of "smart cities". This happened through a comprehensive wave of urbanization that concentrated cultural and economic life within a few big cities (especially capitals). Faced with this opening to globalization and its urban impacts, it made sense for the Gulf states to reclaim and reproduce the symbols of nomadic life as a form of "authenticity" alongside the corresponding wave of globalization. Gradually, nomadism became a kind of cultural capital despite having nearly disintegrated as a way of life in Gulf societies. Here, it ought to be noted that the Gulf's "bedouinization of culture" was not invoked in the context of social conflict (as was the case in other Arab states) but out of a desire to establish a degree of balance in the face of globalization.
- Sixth, the presentation of these issues would not be complete without discussing "national identity", or association with a particular political entity. Although the small size of Gulf societies has led them to look to larger identities, especially Arab identity, there has been discussion of national identity at many points in the region's recent history, with emphasis on its precedence over other identities. There are two aspects to national identity: the first, which is political and legal, is based on the principle of citizenship and regulates the rights and duties of each "citizen" – one who identifies with this political identity. But states generally deal with this political entity not as if it were something arbitrary, but as if there were a distinct cultural fabric that constitutes it. The state works to strengthen the cultural content of national identity, which represents the second aspect. In this way, national identity touches on all aspects of the cultural issue.

The ACRPS proposes to discuss these essentially cultural issues facing Gulf states through the second track of the tenth-annual Gulf Studies Forum, with emphasis on the policies Gulf states are implementing to address them. Here, the institutions of Gulf states are understood not only as cultural ministries or related bodies, but as all decision-making institutions. This also includes the societal perception of the cultural issue, which plays a role in decision making.

On this topic, the ACRPS suggests the following themes:

- The cultures of Gulf countries: similarities and differences with other cultures
- Gulf states' need for cultural expressions and symbols
- The cultural symbols of Gulf states
- How Gulf states have managed the issue of identity through its cultural dimension
- The cultural content of national identity in the Gulf
- Gulf culture: coastal cities and the desert
- Gulf culture: orientalist and realist views
- The culture of Gulf countries against globalization
- Reviewing Gulf states' plans and strategies for managing the cultural issue



- State institutions involved in the cultural issue (culture ministries, etc.) and their efforts
- The cultural issue in multicultural societies
- The Gulf city as reflective of a mixed culture

Guidelines for participation in the forum

- The Gulf Studies Forum invites university professors and researchers from Gulf countries and other specialists to submit research papers on either of the two tracks.
- The academic committee will accept paper abstracts (approx. 350 words) no later than Saturday 20 May 2023 that include: the research question that the paper will discuss, a brief overview of the literature, the key argument, methodology, and sources. Abstracts should be submitted with an updated CV that includes the titles of articles that the researcher has produced in related fields (if applicable). Abstracts, CVs, and any other correspondence should be directed to: gulf.forum@dohainstitute.org
- The academic committee will inform both successful and unsuccessful applicants no later than Thursday 8 June 2023.
- The committee will accept full manuscripts (between 5,000-7,000 words, including footnotes and citations) that are eligible for peer review and adhere to the Center's style and objectivity specifications no later than 23 September 2023.
- The approval of an abstract does not automatically imply the approval of the paper for presentation at the Forum. The committee will inform the researcher of its decision and whether it has made recommendations for improvement or adjustments.
- The Forum will cover travel and accommodation expenses and does not offer remuneration for any research being presented. Papers are considered the intellectual property of the Forum.
- Researchers may submit papers in either Arabic or English.

References

"GDP, PPP (current international \$)". *World Bank*. Accessed on 03/04/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3IST17w>

"Xi Jinping's Visit to Saudi Arabia and Prospects for Relations with China". Situation Assessment. ACRPS. 22/12/2022. Accessed on 02/04/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3nDIHdl>

Chang, I-wei Jennifer et al. *The Arabs and China: The Future of Relations with a Rising Power*. Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019.

Alabdulrahman, Hikmat. *China and the Middle East: A Historical Study on China's Evolving Position toward the Arab Region Post-Cold War*. Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020.

"Belt and Road Initiative: China-Middle East Cooperation in an Age of Geopolitical Turbulence". Brookings Doha Center. 16-17/12/2019. Accessed on 05/04/2021, at: <https://brook.gs/39EDwPK>