

The Iran War, the Middle East and the Reshaping of the International and Regional Order

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When the air strikes on Iran began on 28 February 2020, they effectively set in motion a regional and global geopolitical dynamic quite different from that envisaged by their two main instigators, US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The fundamental objective, publicly declared by President Trump, was the fall of the Iranian regime of the ayatollahs – *regime change* – which was, in the end, the long-delayed response of the “*Great Satan*,” as Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called the US, to the humiliating evacuation of the American embassy from Tehran in 1979-81. President Trump openly encouraged the Iranian people to pursue this primary objective by inciting their demonstrations and potential uprisings. Added to this main goal, particularly on the part of Israel, were the elimination of the nuclear capability that Iran had been developing since the time of the Shah, and the destruction of the military capabilities of both the Iranian Army and the Revolutionary Guard.

Seen from the other side of the Persian Gulf – or Arabian Gulf, depending on your perspective – the principal problem was that the outbreak of war took place without the prior knowledge of the Gulf monarchies, all of which are allies of the United States. They now found themselves embroiled against their will in a war between powers vying for hegemony in the region.

The plans of President Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu failed. Although the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and a large part of the Iranian regime’s leadership were killed in the first attack, the regime demonstrat-

ed a remarkable capacity for reorganization and resilience. Within a few hours and over the following days, it became clear that there would be no regime change, but rather a further radicalization of the power held by the ayatollahs and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, now under the control of a new generation of hardliners towards their external and internal enemies, with a sharp increase in security control over the country. As for the elimination of nuclear capabilities – in particular uranium enrichment, which could lead to the manufacture of an atomic bomb – it is unclear what impact the bombings, the ongoing acts of sabotage and the successive waves of targeted assassinations over the years against the Iranian nuclear scientists involved have actually had. This was, in any case, the second attempt, following the first campaign of Israeli air strikes, supported by the United States, which began with the Twelve-Day War (13-24 June 2020). According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the imminent construction of an Iranian atomic bomb could not be confirmed, although Iranian centrifuges had already enriched uranium to 60%. In any case, while it seems evident that the attack severely damaged the Natanz and Fordo facilities with deep-penetrating US bunker-busting bombs, it is unclear whether it affected a substantial part of Iran’s nuclear research and development programme or its deep underground facilities in the mountains, particularly at Pickaxe Mountain.

Iran’s response to the new, large-scale attack and open war launched on 28 February was not long in coming. Despite the destruction of part of its military installations and capabilities by targeted American and Israeli air strikes and the death of Ali Khamenei and a large number of senior Iranian commanders, Iran began bombing oil, energy and desalination facilities on the western coast of the Gulf, as well as

the US military bases established there, with uneven success. As the weapon that proved most effective, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas supplies pass. This was the major development with global repercussions, involving the laying of mines and the imposition of a transit ban, under threat of drone and missile attacks against any ships daring to defy the blockade – as indeed happened. It was a clear demonstration of the growing interconnection between regional wars and global stability, and of the systemic consequences of a regional crisis affecting energy security, maritime trade and international law in a globalized world, despite its increasing fragmentation. Donald Trump's failure laid bare the relative decline of American imperial power in a more complex and multipolar world.

Far from achieving an easy regime change – similar to the success President Trump had enjoyed in his attack on Venezuela shortly beforehand, on 3 January 2026, with the “removal” of President Maduro and his wife, in the case of Iran the failure was evident, due to unclear and miscalculated objectives. In reality, however, the rapid, large-scale, surgical operation envisaged by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu – involving a popular uprising and a regime change supported from within – turned into a quagmire of a war of unpredictable duration, given Iran's resilience. Their allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were also directly involved and severely affected, as they witnessed what had always been unthinkable: a large-scale military attack – not a mere terrorist attack – on the sources of wealth through which, over recent decades, such an extraordinary transformation of their economies and countries had been taking place, as well as the blockade of their exports. It was, so to speak, the “shattered mirror” of the GCC monarchies' plans for economic opulence and modernization, which were now suddenly revealed to be incredibly fragile and precarious. Following the extraordinary modernization of all the Gulf monarchies over the last two decades through massive investment in major infrastructure and in new technological, industrial and tourism sectors, their overarching aim has been and remains to move beyond dependence on hydrocarbons. In preparation for the post-oil era, they wish to become a major hub for technological innovation and interconnection between Europe (and the East Coast of the United States) and

the countries of Asia, particularly the entire Asian subcontinent and the Far East. All these countries have drawn up new and ambitious plans for the future, which take the form of the major Saudi Vision 2030 programme and the United Arab Emirates' We the UAE 2031 plan. But perhaps the most crucial factor is the gradual rise to positions of power over the last twenty years of a new generation of royal families and executives at all levels, whose education and personal capabilities far exceed those of their parents and grandparents. Their leading figures are the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ).

The rapid, large-scale, surgical operation envisaged by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu turned into a quagmire of a war of unpredictable duration, given Iran's resilience

The 28 February 2026 marked a genuine turning point. The outbreak of the war launched by Israel and the US against Iran and the Iranian regime's military response have shattered confidence in US protection and its strategy in the Middle East. It is a crisis of the very fabric of the Gulf's security structure. With the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the missile and drone strikes against oil facilities, infrastructure and US bases within the territory of the Gulf monarchies, also reaching Israel and subsequently Jordan, the war has forced the Gulf monarchies to face the fact that the United States and President Trump are no longer a reliable partner, since they prioritized collusion with Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel over the historic pact for protection and security in the Gulf in exchange for guarantees of stability and oil supplies. That pact, established in 1945 upon US President Roosevelt's return from Yalta, by the latter and King Abdulaziz ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia during their legendary meeting aboard the cruiser *USS Quincy*, had since been the cornerstone of the Kingdom's security and that of the entire Gulf region.

But this breakdown in trust was by no means a wholly new development. It was the culmination of a perception among the Gulf Arab states that US policies in the Middle East were unreliable, following the resounding failures in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, among many other episodes. The United States' military strength and capability were and remain indisputable, but the use of that strength has been repeatedly contested, particularly in asymmetric, protracted wars against unconventional enemies. The key point in this new war now lies in the novel fact that it is not only common enemies who are being subjected to bombing and destruction, but also the United States' own major allies in the region – such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has been a key ally for the past 80 years, and which has been joined since their independence by the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. This turning point in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East will have significant repercussions both in the Gulf region and the Middle East itself, as well as on the global stage. It is a clear demonstration of how President Trump's foreign policy – which prioritizes the use of threats and force while undermining the rule of law and institutions – is accelerating the crisis of the Liberal International Order, based on rules and institutions, and is driving its transformation towards a world of disorderly multipolar confrontation. The crisis in alliances and in regional powers' confidence in American leadership is now driving them towards greater strategic autonomy, to the detriment of traditional US hegemony, in this case in the Gulf region.

Netanyahu's Strategy in Israel's War against Iran

Despite the high-profile presence of the United States and President Trump in this new war that broke out on 28 February, it is worth bearing in mind that, regardless of the pressure exerted by the major powers (the United States, China and, to some extent, Russia) on this critical point in global geography and geopolitics, the real war, in this case, is ultimately between Israel and Iran. The Islamic Republic and Israel perceive each other as an existential threat and act as two regional powers vying for hegemony in the region. In its struggle against the "Great Sa-

tan" (the US) and the "Little Satan" (Israel), the Islamic Republic of Iran, apart from exercising iron-fisted internal control over its population and institutions, has pursued a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it has continued with the nuclear programme inherited from the Shah's era – a programme which, incidentally, began with American collaboration – with the aim of becoming a nuclear power, just as Israel, Pakistan and India are in the region, as a future guarantee of security. On the other hand, it has sought to create a network of external allies for Iran – the "Axis of Resistance" – within the so-called Shiite Crescent of the Middle East, which roughly coincides with the historic Fertile Crescent.

The United States' involvement in this new war – while crucial, decisive and a continuation of the long and disastrous relationship between the US and Iran since the fall of the Shah in 1979 – is, in fact, an afterthought and a matter of circumstance. President Trump was dragged by Prime Minister Netanyahu into a war aimed at regime change, which he thought would be easy and short-lived; he now recognizes that it is not his war and is trying to extricate himself from it as soon as possible with the least possible political cost – a cost that is already enormous. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised not to embroil the United States once again in the "endless and costly wars in the Middle East." That is precisely the risk he now faces, with his approval ratings at a low ebb among the American electorate, just three months ahead of the crucial mid-term elections in the United States, in which he stands to pay a heavy price.

The ultra-nationalist, ultra-religious and far-right coalition governing Israel under Netanyahu has never made any secret of its ambitions to build the "Greater Israel"

The ultra-nationalist, ultra-religious and far-right coalition governing Israel under Netanyahu has never made any secret of its ambitions to build the "Greater Israel." The painful but effective opportunity to make decisive progress on this project arose with the

tremendous shock caused in Israel by Hamas's massive terrorist attack on 7 October 2023. Through the various actions undertaken as part of Israel's response to Hamas's massive attack, Netanyahu is not only aiming to gain control of Gaza and attempting to destroy Hamas but has also proceeded to develop a comprehensive programme, the final stage of which has been a large-scale direct attack on Iran, seen as the source of existential threat to Israel.

The outbreak of the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran has intensified internal divisions within the GCC

The first phase of the Israeli response consisted of a terrible, apocalyptic retaliation involving the brutal destruction of Gaza and the – as yet unsuccessful – attempt to expel the Palestinian population from the Strip, which was only prevented by Egypt's firm refusal. At the same time and secondly, violent pressure on the Palestinian population of the West Bank by fanatical Israeli settlers – clearly and actively backed by the Israeli army – has increased dramatically. Thirdly, the destruction of the Shiite forces allied with Iran in the Shiite Crescent's "Axis of Resistance" has begun, with a large-scale attack on the Hezbollah militias in Lebanon that had been firing missiles at northern Israel in solidarity with Hamas's struggle in Gaza. Netanyahu's response has led to an extraordinary incursion by the Israeli army across the entire southern strip of Lebanon and to intense bombardments, including on Beirut and other parts of the country. The Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Shiite militias in Iraq have likewise been subjected to bombing. The very fall of the Assad dynasty's Alawite regime in Syria is another important factor in this weakening of Iran's position vis-à-vis Israel. Netanyahu also ordered the bombing of the main military bases and installations that had just been vacated by Bashar al-Assad's army in order to degrade the potential military power of the new Syria, as well as the occupation of a new strip of territory within Syria, in the demilitarized zone established under the 1974 agreements, beyond the perimeter Israel already con-

trolled in the Golan Heights. These territories, which are theoretically under Syrian sovereignty according to the UN and international law, have been under Israeli occupation since 1967 and were unilaterally annexed by Israel in 1981. Syria was the key base of support for Iran's proxies, who are enemies of Israel. Its new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa – a former Sunni jihadist with the al-Nusra Front, later Hayat Tahir al-Sham, which remained on the US list of terrorist organizations until 8 November 2025 – is today being received by Donald Trump at the White House. This was the crucial moment chosen by Netanyahu, while Iran was weakened, to directly eliminate Iran's nuclear and military capabilities and, together with the United States, launch the attack aimed at regime change. He also took advantage of the wave of demonstrations and protests by the Iranian people themselves, which the regime – precisely because of the external attack – was able to bring under control immediately.

The Reshaping of the Regional Order in the Gulf Region

Within the system of balance and confrontation that had prevailed in the Gulf since the 1979 Khomeini Revolution, the age-old division between Sunnis and Shiites persisted around the Gulf, alongside the open confrontation with Israel. This was more radical on the part of the Shiites and more accommodating on the part of the Sunni GCC countries, under the cloak of US protection.

It was this conciliatory development – even as tensions persisted – that enabled the Obama administration, together with the European Union and the member states of the United Nations Security Council, to negotiate the major nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which is controlled and monitored on the ground by the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency. The JCPOA provides for a regime of inspections and verifications going far beyond the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

During his first term, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. This withdrawal obstructed the negotiated path towards dismantling Iran's nuclear programme, which posed a threat to both Israel and the Sunni regional powers in the area. President Trump

reinstated the sanctions regime against Iran and implemented his policy of “maximum pressure” against the Islamic Republic. At the same time, he promoted the Abraham Accords aimed at normalizing Israel’s relations with Arab countries. Under these accords, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco established full diplomatic relations with Israel, as Egypt had already done in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 through their respective peace treaties. During his term in office, President Joe Biden continued to promote the Abraham Accords, even calling on countries to gradually move their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, with little success despite the example set by the US embassy. Obviously, Iran views the whole movement surrounding the Abraham Accords as a major anti-Iranian coalition.

Israel’s overreaction to the Hamas terrorist attack, with the devastation and destruction of Gaza and the deaths of more than 70,000 Palestinians – described by the UN as genocide – has made it impossible for the Abraham Accords to make any further progress at a time when it seemed that even Saudi Arabia itself was prepared to normalize relations with Israel, a move which might well have been followed by a large number of the other Arab countries.

Thereafter, the Iranian regime’s response to the major attack by Israel and the United States in 2026, with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz – which has disrupted global supplies of oil and natural gas, destabilizing the global economy – has gone so far as to affect the United States itself and undermine President Trump’s standing with the American public just a few months before the crucial mid-term elections that could see him lose control of both houses of Congress.

Towards a New Security Architecture in the Gulf

Beyond the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Iran’s counterattack – involving missile and drone strikes on oil facilities and other civilian and military infrastructure, as well as US military bases on the other side of the Gulf – affected the different countries in the region to varying degrees. The destruction and damage caused by the disruption to gas and oil exports hit the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain particularly hard. Saudi Arabia and Oman suffered a lesser impact due to their larger size and the fact that they have alternative outlets for their oil pro-

duction. Oman’s ports are located on the Indian Ocean, beyond the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia’s major East–West Pipeline connects directly to the Red Sea, while the Habshan-Fujairah pipeline, which runs directly from Abu Dhabi to the Gulf of Oman, has a lower capacity, although there are now urgent plans to expand it. These alternative routes meant that the impact on oil exports was much less severe. This contributed to very different attitudes among the various GCC countries, while Kuwait maintained a wait-and-see approach. Meanwhile, the Shi’ite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen began to participate directly in the Iranian counter-offensive against Israel and the American bases in the Sunni Gulf states.

The war in Gaza – which some seek to ignore – and, in particular, the war in Iran, place Europe in a situation where it has no choice but to fend for itself

This uneven impact of the destruction of infrastructure on the capacity to export crude oil and gas was compounded by differing prior approaches to how the new security and defence architecture for the GCC countries should be structured, once it had become clear that the security and defence guarantees provided by the United States – on which this traditional security order and the defence architecture itself had been based for 80 years – could not be relied upon.

The outbreak of the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran has intensified internal divisions within the GCC. Saudi Arabia has opted for a non-belligerent stance and is seeking some form of understanding with Tehran, while the United Arab Emirates has taken the opposite position, clearly aligning itself with the United States and Israel. For the UAE, the US security guarantee – reinforced since the diplomatic recognition of Israel through technological, commercial, intelligence and security cooperation with Tel Aviv – remains the only viable way to protect both the Emirates and the GCC as a whole. This approach is underpinned by the UAE’s

extensive economic diversification: more than 70% of its GDP no longer comes from oil, thanks to the development of sectors such as aviation, tourism, finance and technology. Since the normalization of relations with Israel, the UAE has been considered part of the modernized world led by the United States. Furthermore, it has maintained a prominent international profile through mediation initiatives between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in the negotiations on the Renaissance Dam between Sudan and Ethiopia, and in efforts to ease tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

The UAE has been described as “Little Sparta” due to its firm commitment to a strong military, boasting one of the most capable armies in the Arab world. This orientation has led it to intervene militarily in Yemen and Libya, as well as to establish military bases in Eritrea and Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, opposite the entrance to the Red Sea via Bab el-Mandeb. Its military efforts have made it a major importer of arms, primarily from the United States, but also from Turkey, France and other countries, including Israel. Under the leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed (MBZ), the UAE is also committed to forging new international alliances beyond its loyalty to the US, which it continues to regard as its key ally. It participates in both China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor, and has strengthened its relations with the BRICS countries, particularly with China, Russia and India. However, since the normalization of relations with Israel, its alliance with the United States and Tel Aviv has been significantly strengthened, with a sharp increase in trade and technological ties with Israel, including the approval of a free trade agreement between the two countries. In fact, by facilitating the use of its airspace and various military facilities for Israeli and US attacks against Iran, the UAE has become the only country in the Arab world that is not neutral, but clearly belligerent in this war. As a result, it has borne the brunt of more than half of the Iranian drone and missile attacks in response to the Israeli-US strikes. For this reason, Mohamed bin Zayed opposes Saudi Arabia’s conciliatory line and maintains that the only possible understanding with Iran lies in its military defeat or containment, in line with the position defended by Trump and Netanyahu.

The rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia also extends to the geopolitics of oil. MBZ has chosen not

to adhere to the price-containment measures championed by Saudi Arabia within OPEC, eventually withdrawing from the Organization with effect from 1 May 2026.

Owing to its greater size, its role as a central nation in the Arab and Islamic world, guardian of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina and cradle of the Arabic language and the revelation to the Prophet, Saudi Arabia has assumed leadership in the search for a new system of alliances. It does so without renouncing its commitment to maintaining the best possible relations with the United States or taking advantage of American military, technological and investment capabilities. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had already had a bitter experience with the Biden administration over the murder and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. During his presidential campaign, Biden publicly accused him of being the direct instigator, based on conclusive CIA reports. However, Biden himself pragmatically mended the relationship during his term in office. With Donald Trump back in the White House, Mohammed bin Salman has maintained close ties with the United States, but has also pushed for new alliances capable of offering Saudi Arabia and the GCC as a whole an alternative security architecture to the US defence umbrella, the reliability of which has been called into question.

In recent years, under the leadership of Crown Prince MBS, Saudi Arabia has adopted a pragmatic and conciliatory policy, including towards Iran. Although in his early years as Defence Minister and Prime Minister he favoured hard-power approaches, with military interventions such as the 2015 campaign in Yemen against the Houthis and the 2017 blockade of Qatar, he has since prioritized diplomacy over military force. This shift even opened up the possibility of Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords, a prospect ultimately thwarted by the war and destruction in Gaza. Today, Saudi Arabia has returned to the traditional Arab position: making the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel conditional upon a clear prospect of the creation of a Palestinian state.

Considering Saudi Arabia as a key country in the Arab world and the Middle East, MBS has promoted a security architecture for the Gulf, based in part on accepting coexistence with Iran under the best possible conditions. With this aim in mind, Riyadh and Tehran re-established diplomatic relations in 2023,

notably with China acting as mediator. In line with this approach of avoiding confrontation and seeking understanding in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has maintained a neutral stance in the war launched by Israel and the United States against Iran, refusing to allow the use of its airspace or the Al-Kharj air base for attacks on Iranian territory, despite the displeasure expressed by President Trump.

This process of seeking new alliances took a significant step forward on 7 August 2026 with the signing of a defence pact between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan in the symbolic, sacred city of Mecca. According to this vision, which has been described as a “dual hedging” security architecture, Saudi Arabia, while maintaining and deepening its historic alliance with Washington, must develop closer military cooperation with Turkey and Pakistan, which Egypt could join in the future. Beyond this first regional circle of defence agreements, Riyadh also aspires to promote a broader geopolitical coalition in the region, which would also include Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Qatar and Oman. The UAE has clearly rejected this proposal and remains on the sidelines. Despite the war – in which it sees itself uninvolved, or strives to remain so –, Saudi Arabia is keeping diplomatic channels open with Iran, with which it has been seeking some form of understanding or coexistence since the resumption of diplomatic relations with Tehran.

Gaza, the War on Iran and the Shift Towards a Post-American Global Order

The destruction of Gaza by the Israeli army and the war launched against Iran by Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump in February 2026 are bringing about profound changes at a global level that will unfold over time. This marks a turning point towards a new system of international relations with its epicentre in the Middle East, with far-reaching future implications for global geopolitics.

- The Gulf Cooperation Council was never a defensive alliance, but the open war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran is completely altering the situation, given that it has been conducted with disregard for the Gulf states' direct interests, with bombs flying over their heads or exploding on their own territory.

Despite their internal disagreements, the Gulf states will have to move, presumably under Saudi Arabia's leadership, towards a new regional security architecture that preserves their historic alliance with the United States, but which does not drag them into endorsing Israel's actions in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon or Syria, while also avoiding confrontation with Iran as far as possible. Fundamentally, they will seek a system of alliances that grants them greater strategic autonomy. This will lead to a more open game in the Middle East, in which the cooperation of the Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia, with other global powers – such as China, Russia or Europe – will become more explicit. In addition, further alliances with middle powers in the region and across the wider Global South will be created. It is still too early to say how these developments will play out.

A multipolar system is emerging, with a greater presence of the major powers, regional middle powers and large groupings seeking to impose their own narrative

- The European Union has highlighted cooperation with the Gulf and Middle Eastern countries as one of its priorities, relying above all on its characteristic instruments of soft power: trade, economic relations, cooperation and political understanding. Although it now has a significant diplomatic presence, for the time being and in the short term, European strategic sovereignty is unlikely to extend much further. But it is also true that the construction of Europe has made progress when the EU has faced difficulties. The Russian attack and the war in Ukraine have confronted Europe with an existential threat which, together with the divisions and weakening of the transatlantic bond and the US defence guarantee, is forcing Europe to advance in its strategic autonomy. The war in Gaza – which some seek to ignore – and, in particular, the war in Iran, place Europe in a situation

where it has no choice but to fend for itself. The war in Iran affects Europe in various ways: economically, through rising energy prices; and geopolitically, through the instability it causes in a region of great sensitivity to Europe, and through Russia's increased ability to finance the war in Ukraine as a result of rising gas and oil prices. But Europe also has significant assets. The EU is the largest trading partner of the MENA region, though China has overtaken it in the Gulf states. Similarly, it has Association Agreements with all Mediterranean countries except Syria. It is the world's largest humanitarian actor; and, given the migration flows, the diaspora living in Europe compels it to take action, as it feels closer to and more concerned about the situation in that region and in the Arab World in general. In 2022, the European Union adopted its EU Partnership Strategy with the Gulf. Furthermore, it is clear to everyone that the European Union will have to play a key role in financing the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, whatever system is chosen.

- The EU and the GCC countries currently share a sense of insecurity regarding the defence guarantees traditionally provided by the United States, which, according to some, places them on a path of *strategic convergence*. In March 2026, the Europeans rejected President Trump's request that Europe send military assets to assist with the security of shipping and commercial transit through the Strait of Hormuz for the duration of the war. However, they have made progress on plans to take on this important mission once a sustainable ceasefire is in place, contributing to clearing mines in the strait and protecting commercial maritime traffic. This would effectively involve extending the mandate of the EU's Naval Force Operation Aspides, which has already been carrying out similar functions since 2024 in the Red Sea and region to prevent Houthi drone and missile attacks. This is an important precedent, which the United States has welcomed, albeit with scepticism. It has not objected to this crucial security mission in the key Gulf region being carried out for the first time by forces not under direct US command either. This is yet another example of the upheaval caused by the wars in Gaza and Iran combined, which is

opening up various possibilities in a changing international order in which the unipolar world of US hegemony is being left behind. In its place, a multipolar system is emerging, with a greater presence of the major powers, regional middle powers and large groupings seeking to impose their own narrative, such as the BRICS, Russia, China or the European and Western world, now subject to criticism under the narrative of "the West against the rest."

- On the global geopolitical stage, the Middle East – and in particular the Gulf region – occupies a crucial position, above all because of the role it is set to play for decades to come as one of the key hubs of the global energy geo-economy until the end of the oil age.

China, Russia and the diverse group of countries that make up the new Global South are the revisionist forces challenging the Liberal International Order (LIO), which has hitherto been led by the United States and Europe.

The only certainties at present are instability, confrontation and war. It is to be hoped that we can at least halt the war and achieve some form of peace

Beijing has benefited greatly from the Liberal International Order since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002, with rapid economic growth based on export-oriented industrialization. For this reason, it does not seek to destroy the LIO, but rather to transform it into a Multipolar International Order with China at its centre. To this end, it participates actively in the Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank and the WTO – while calling for their reform to bring them into line with the current relative weight of member countries' economies, which differs greatly from the balance of power established in 1945. At the same time, it promotes alternative institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and its Development Bank, as well as other financial mechanisms, with the aim of reducing the

dominance of the dollar as a reserve currency and in international trade. Its pragmatic approach to international relations, based on non-interference in internal affairs and the promotion of trade and investment, is generally well received by countries in the Global South. In 2024, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt joined the BRICS, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait became dialogue partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as early as 2023. This was one of the key outcomes of President Xi Jinping's 2022 visit to Riyadh to chair the China–GCC summit, following other visits to Egypt, the UAE and Iran. China regards the Gulf states as being of strategic interest for the supply of oil, gas and other raw materials, as well as a market for its industrial exports, a source of large-scale infrastructure projects funded by loans, and a transit route to its primary major markets: the European Union, North African countries and even the East Coast of the United States. However, China is not interested in replacing the US as the guarantor of security in the Gulf or the Middle East. Given the United States' track record in particular, China prefers that the US continue to shoulder this responsibility, while China acts as a privileged economic partner. It has therefore signed strategic partnership agreements at various levels with all the Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and Iran. China thus presents itself as a constructive nation seeking peace and mutual benefit with all countries and, on some occasions, acts as a mediator – as in the restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023, building on the efforts already undertaken by Iraq and Turkey. All of this clearly demonstrates both China's interest in having a presence in the Gulf region and the Middle East, and the GCC countries' desire for strategic autonomy, particularly given the now evident unreliability of the traditional security guarantee provided by the United States. This does not prevent China from maintaining particularly significant military cooperation with Iran in the current conflict. Beijing is providing air defence systems and new-generation industrial cooperation in the military sphere, specifically in the areas of ballistic missiles and advanced radar technology. Russia, for its part, has benefited greatly from the rise in oil and gas prices following the war in Iran and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. Moscow maintains firm diplomatic support by condemning the attacks by Israel and the United States in various fo-

runs, while keeping a low profile and denying any direct involvement in the war. However, in 2025, Moscow signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with Tehran for the exchange of technology and weaponry, which has been implemented in particular through the supply of Shahed drones and short-range ballistic missiles to Russia, while Moscow provides intelligence for monitoring and geolocation, air defence systems and military training, including joint exercises. At the same time, Moscow is endeavouring not to jeopardize its relations with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC monarchies. For both Moscow and Beijing, the war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran presents a good opportunity to capitalize on the anti-American and anti-Western sentiment held by a significant proportion of governments and public opinion in the countries of the new Global South.

In this evolving world of the new *post-American era* in the Gulf and on a global scale, the United States will continue to play a pivotal role alongside the growing presence of other powers or emerging groups and alliances. The Gulf region will continue to be an extraordinarily sensitive issue both in the geopolitics of the Middle East and on the global stage. The shaping of a new architecture of security and cooperation in the region will be important not only for establishing a new balance that allows peace to be maintained. It is also a testing ground for finding new solutions that contribute positively to cooperation, stability and the progress of the global order. The problem is that almost everything remains to be done, and the only certainties at present are instability, confrontation and war. It is to be hoped that we can at least halt the war and achieve some form of peace, which, as things stand, is no small feat. Overcoming confrontation and instability will undoubtedly require a far greater effort.

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