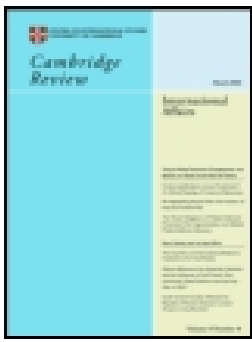


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<https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Russian-Approach-to-Middle-East-Conflicts-and-the-Arab-World.pdf>

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2021/Borschevskaya-Russia-Soft-Power/>



## Implications of a regional order in flux: Chinese and Russian relations with the United Arab Emirates

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# Implications of a regional order in flux: Chinese and Russian relations with the United Arab Emirates

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**Abstract** *The transition away from post-Cold War unipolarity has repercussions for regional orders that have been shaped and sustained by US preponderance. Small states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), traditionally reliant upon extra-regional powers to balance against more powerful neighbours, are adopting an increasingly muscular foreign policy to hedge against a possible reduced US regional role. Consequently, there is an opening for non-traditional powers to adopt larger roles. Primarily using an outside-in approach, this paper explores the nature of China and Russia's more active bilateral engagement with the UAE. It finds that in an environment where political instability within the larger Middle East combines with uncertainty about US intentions, regional leaders and leaders of extra-regional powers with interests in the Persian Gulf have to adjust accordingly, either to protect those interests or to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their presence in a strategically and economically important theatre.*

## Introduction

The structure of the international political order is in transition from the post-Cold War 'unipolar moment' to one that will most likely be characterized by multipolarity (Layne 2018; Allison 2020; Cooley and Nexon 2020). This systemic change has significant secondary effects, as regional orders that have been shaped and sustained by US preponderance undergo transitions as well. States within these transitioning regions are responding by recalibrating their foreign policies to take into account the lack of consensus on whether multipolarity will beget more stability or instability. Consequently, alliance and partnership choices need to be reconsidered, and the role of extra-regional powers comes under question as well.

In no region is this more clear than the Persian Gulf. Identified as a vital American interest with the Carter Doctrine of 1980, Pax Americana has been the organizing principle of the Gulf throughout the post-Cold War era (Hinnebusch 2015). While a sometimes problematic ally or partner for the Gulf monarchies, defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) and facilities access agreements (FAAs) with the US cemented a regional status quo that favored the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states over their regional rivals, Iran and Iraq. This security architecture has come under strain in recent years as US commitment to its maintenance is perceived to be waning, despite formidable military

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preponderance (Farouk 2019; Salem 2019). For Gulf monarchies the possibility of a reduced US security role represents a major challenge to regional order that could empower Iran, their major strategic rival. Uncertainty at the international level is therefore directly contributing to tension at the regional level in the Gulf.

One consequence of the perceived decline in US commitment has been an opening for other extra-regional powers to adopt larger roles in the Gulf, where there is greater receptiveness to this outreach. This is not an especially recent development; the US security umbrella has provided a low-cost entry into the Gulf for other states to deepen and broaden their largely economic regional footprints (Fulton and Sim 2018). However, unclear messaging from the US has given leaders in the Gulf monarchies cause to deepen these relationships, and recent years have seen several GCC heads of state paying increased visits to countries where they traditionally have had relatively modest diplomatic engagement.

Political instability within the larger Middle East - North Africa (MENA) system combined with uncertainty about US intentions contribute to a Persian Gulf regional order in flux. In this environment regional leaders and leaders of extra-regional powers with interests in the Gulf have to adjust accordingly, either to protect those interests or to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their presence in a strategically and economically important theatre. This paper examines attempts by extra-regional powers to develop a stronger presence in regions undergoing order transition, using case studies of Chinese and Russian outreach to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Both have become more active and ambitious players in the Gulf in recent years. China, building on dense economic relations, has used its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a means of expanding its regional presence, with energy trade, investment, and infrastructure contracting making it an important external economic power in the region. The UAE has been at the center of much of Beijing's blueprint for the region. On the other hand, Russia's engagement has been more strategic in nature, and its relations with the UAE have been a means of reinforcing Moscow's claim to be a major actor in global energy markets and in regional stability in the broader MENA region. China and Russia have identified the UAE as an important regional actor across multiple issue areas, with a degree of stability and prosperity that differentiates it from most of its MENA neighbours. Leaders in the Emirates are taking advantage of this perception to gain support for their political and economic goals at the domestic and regional levels, and also to hedge against the perceived spectre of US disengagement.

This article begins with an analysis of the Gulf as a regional security complex in which regional rivalries have shaped an asymmetrical security environment where small states have come to rely on extra-regional powers to balance against larger and more powerful neighbours. It then examines how this asymmetrical security environment has influenced the UAE's relations with these extra-regional powers. The next section approaches from an external perspective, focusing on the extent to which China and Russia have engaged with the changing regional order in the Gulf. It assesses the degree of convergence with the UAE's priorities and considers the sustainability of these new forms of engagement.

## **Features of the Gulf regional order**

The policy options for local and extra-regional states in a hegemonic regional order vary depending upon their relationship with the dominant power and their degree of satisfaction with the distribution of power. The smaller states, if satisfied, will likely adopt a bandwagon approach so long as their preferences are being met through their relationship with the hegemon (Walt 1987; Schweller 1994; Rickli and Almezaini 2017). At the same time, a common feature of asymmetrical alliances is the fear of abandonment, in which the weaker state suffers from 'the constant worry about being deserted by one's ally' because 'the ally has alternative partners and may opt for one of them if it becomes dissatisfied with present company' (Snyder 1997, 181). Writing with a Gulf perspective on the GCC-US relationship, Al Shayji describes the partnership as 'a classic case study of the built-in dilemmas of an alliance between a stronger party and a weaker party' (Al Shayji 2014, 61). In such a situation, the weaker side's best option is strategic hedging; it can 'create the impression that it might reconsider its policy toward a state that its ally perceives as a real or potential competitor' and 'create a lever against its stronger partners and improve its situation' (Guzansky 2015, 119). In the case of the extra-regional power, bandwagoning with the hegemon may allow it to continue pursuing its interests but at the risk of reinforcing a rival's power. Strategic hedging therefore becomes 'a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality' (Goh 2005, 2). It is a strategy for a second-tier power that wants to develop a regional presence without disrupting a beneficial status quo. By not challenging the dominant power, the hedger expands its regional capabilities, usually through economic means, and then slowly by developing its military capabilities (Tessman 2012). This accurately describes both Chinese and Russian outreach to the UAE, as well as the UAE's receptiveness to a diversified range of extra-regional partners.

For leaders in the Gulf, the overriding preoccupation in foreign and security policy issues concerns other states in the region. As such, regional security complex (RSC) theory provides a useful lens through which to understand the Gulf as well as the foreign policy orientations of the states in it. Buzan described an RSC as 'a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another' (Buzan 1982, 106). Given this definition, the Gulf qualifies as an RSC as regional states 'focus intensely on each other and devote the bulk of their security resources to relations with each other and have done so for decades' (Gause 2010, 4). RSCs are made more dynamic by the role of extra-regional powers, acting on pressures and rivalries at the international level, that often penetrate them and potentially disrupt the regional balance of power (Buzan 1982; Lake and Morgan 1997). The US military preponderance in the Gulf makes it an active member of the RSC (Gause 2010).

The Gulf region has several unique characteristics that make for a challenging security environment to navigate, both for regional and extra-regional states. For much of the modern state period it was a tripolar system, with Iran as the largest and most powerful state, Iraq a powerful yet significantly smaller one, and the six monarchies together as an uneasy grouping

dominated by Saudi Arabia. Balance of power logic should have resulted in Iraq and the Gulf states bandwagoning against Iran; however, it was balance of threat calculations which ultimately influenced alliance and partnership choices (Walt 1987). Pre-revolutionary Iran and the Gulf monarchies, despite tensions, were threatened by Baathist Iraq, a revisionist power aligned with the Soviet Union. This led to a degree of cooperation between regional monarchies, which between the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, the United Kingdom's departure in 1971, and the Carter Doctrine of 1980 ordered the region under the Twin Pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Iranian Revolution upended that fragile arrangement and resulted in the US supporting attempts to strengthen and institutionalize Gulf coordination through the GCC. Intra-Gulf tensions and rivalry partly led the US to conclude that it would have to deepen its involvement from an offshore to an active balancer (Harb 2018). This was a long process and did not fully take shape until Desert Storm, when the US intervened in order to uphold the Gulf status quo. It then signed DCAs with Kuwait (1991), Bahrain (1991), Qatar (1992), and the UAE (1994), complementing the FAA signed with Oman in 1980.

From this point, hegemonic stability is typically used to characterize the regional order, as US military preponderance largely prevented Iran and Iraq—both dissatisfied powers—from challenging the status quo. Gause (2014) modifies this assessment by describing the period after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent years as 'failed hegemony'—until that point, the US was satisfied to work with the existing status quo despite Iraqi and Iranian hostility. In 2003, its approach shifted from status quo maintenance to an attempt at re-ordering the Gulf with a democratic Iraq at the center. The new approach brought disastrous consequences, as it violated the balance of power order that had underpinned the regional system until that point. Despite the human costs of the war in Iraq and the subsequent anarchy as a once-functioning state transitioned from a player to a playing field for several competing agents (Gause 2010, 7), the US military preponderance has held. The MENA system cannot be described as having order, but rather as a model of turbulence; a 'multidimensional geography of rival forces and actors within the context of increasingly multipolar global politics' in which the 'inefficiency of balancing, breakdown of regulatory norms, and increased capacities for self-organization by armed non-state actors all help sustain the regional environment of turbulence' (Hazbun 2019, 14). In the Gulf, however, a semblance of order remains. No external power has attempted to disrupt the status quo, and the security umbrella over the GCC states deters serious aggression from Iran. This has created an environment where the GCC states, secure and prosperous, have been able to deeply integrate into the global economy, and in the process have intensified their relationships—largely economically—with several extra-regional powers that have not traditionally been important actors in the Gulf (Fulton and Sim 2018).

This strategy—engagement with extra-regional powers—has long been a practice of the Gulf monarchies and has helped to address security concerns. In the face of material and ideological challenges from their larger neighbours they have adopted an omni-balancing approach (Nonneman 2005). Omni-balancing tells us that leaders in small or developing states are especially sensitive or vulnerable to security threats at domestic and systemic levels.

Transnational ideological threats are especially prevalent in the Gulf and challenges posed by sectarian networks and political Islam are perceived as threats to regime stability, which drives many foreign policy considerations throughout the Gulf monarchies. This is a point that Ryan emphasizes, stating that Middle Eastern regimes 'use alliances not just in the traditional sense, as external defense pacts, but also and perhaps even more often for domestic regime security' (2019, 9). Extra-regional powers can either support or challenge regime stability through their engagement. Furthermore, in considering their alliance and partnership choices, Gulf leaders will consider: 'which outside power is most likely to protect me from the internal and external threats (as well as the combination of both) that I face?' (David 1991, 238). The US has long satisfied this role for the Gulf monarchies, but there is a perceived need to diversify their great power relations.

### **The UAE's foreign policy at the nexus of international and regional pressures**

The Gulf RSC has a deep influence on the UAE's foreign policy orientation. The UAE and its security and foreign policies are best understood as a response to regional pressures informed by domestic concerns. Its leaders' main preoccupations—Iran, Yemen, political Islam, fragile MENA states—are all found in their own neighborhood. MENA instability in the period after the first wave of Arab uprisings caused leaders in Abu Dhabi to reconsider their approach to regional security issues, adopting a more muscular set of policies toward MENA affairs and deepening and widening its range of extra-regional power relationships. Regarding the former, it has asserted itself as a Middle Eastern power (Abdulla 2018), working alone at times and with Saudi Arabia at others in an emerging bilateral alliance. Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed has claimed that the UAE has to 'make self-reliance on our own defense capabilities a first priority' (England and Kerr 2017) and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash provided a rationale for this more robust policy, stating 'In this current international system, it is no longer "write a check and someone is going to come and secure the stability in the region." You have to do some of the burden sharing' (James 2018).

This represents a change in direction for the UAE, which traditionally was content with a more modest foreign policy. Much of the literature on the UAE's foreign policy focuses on 'smallness' as an explanation for this (Rugh 1996; Al Mashat 2008; Al Mezaini 2012). In taking on a more outsized role in MENA affairs, however, it is becoming clear that self-perception matters, and leaders in the UAE are coming to see their country not as a small state, but as a regional power with the ability to shape order in a volatile Middle East, a point Al Mezaini makes in describing a UAE that 'has moved beyond the traditional understanding of small-state behavior' (Al Mezaini 2018, 192). This is echoed by Abdulla (2018): 'The UAE of the twenty-first century is mature and a fully confident middle power that has decided to take upon itself huge regional responsibilities. The UAE is no longer the small state it once was.' This is also reflected in the more prominent MENA role assumed by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed - or M.B.Z., as he is commonly known. A recent profile in *The New York Times* describes a more assertive Emirati MENA policy as a



result of the Crown Prince's growing belief that the policy priorities of the UAE and USA were increasingly divergent: 'M.B.Z.'s attitude toward his American patrons seems to have changed. He had plans of his own, and would no longer wait for their approval' (Worth 2020). This is often attributed to a series of US choices, including, but not limited to: the abandonment of Egyptian President Mubarak, the negotiations with Iran leading up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and an inconsistent approach to Syria. As a result, under the Crown Prince, the UAE has pursued a much more ambitious regional policy, especially in attempting to counter the expansion of Iranian influence and the Muslim Brotherhood.

At the same time, this would not be possible without the security guarantees provided by the US through its DCA. Despite its vast financial endowments and ambitious leadership, the UAE cannot change geography, and it is unfortunately situated in a region where traditional rivals Iran and Iraq have substantially larger populations and militaries. This is compounded by the UAE's peculiar demographics, with an expatriate workforce representing an estimated 88% of its population. The corresponding security consequences are obvious: first, it has a small local population to draw upon for its security needs, and second, a large segment of its productive labor force would likely abandon it in the event of a serious conflict with one of its regional rivals. As such, in deterring aggression from larger neighbors, the US relationship, featuring approximately 5,000 US troops and a significant air force presence at Al Dhafra Air Base, is key to the latter's continued security and development.

Emirati leaders have taken to heart the lesson from the Arab uprisings, namely that instability in other less durable Arab states has a spill-over effect that can ultimately topple a fragile regional status quo and imperil the stability that the UAE wants to see reinforced throughout the Middle East. This largely explains why the UAE has evolved from a consumer to a contributor in regional security affairs. Its support for the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, its intervention in Bahrain to quell mass protests, and its involvement in the war in Yemen need to be understood in this context as attempts to prevent agents that challenge the regional status quo from gaining control of these states. This new assertiveness is meant to restore a semblance of the fragile regional order that pre-dated the Arab uprisings (Lynch 2018).

These challenges to the regional order are exacerbated by the perception of transition at the international level. During the post-Cold War period of unipolarity, the US was central in shaping the Middle East, making it a key ally for Emirati leaders in need of a stable regional order. Recent years have seen signs of this commitment weakening due to public and political pressure. Within the US military, however, there has been vocal public recognition of the importance of the UAE as a strategic partner. Anthony Zinni, the former commander of US forces in the Middle East, remarked: 'It's the strongest relationship that the United States has in the Arab world today' (Chandrasekaran 2014). This is reciprocated. For the UAE, the US is 'their indispensable and most capable ally' (Hoyakem and Roberts 2018).

At the same time, the perils of asymmetry are clear in this case, and the fear of abandonment is always a concern. A contributing factor is an inconsistent US MENA policy in recent years. Decisions described above during the Obama administration fostered the perception of the US as an unreliable ally,



which has not changed with the Trump administration. Its seesaw approach to the dispute between Qatar and the self-styled Anti-Terror Quartet (the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt) has not indicated a clear US vision for the region. Its push for the Middle East Strategic Alliance has a stated goal of reducing the US's MENA footprint in a revival of a modern-day Nixon Doctrine. Combined with the announcement—regardless of whether or not it comes to fruition—of a complete troop withdrawal from Syria and a significantly reduced presence in Afghanistan, there is very real concern about a US retreat from the Middle East (Salem 2019). Events in the Gulf region since that announcement have only reinforced the perception of American unreliability. Attacks on oil tankers off the coast of the UAE and in the Gulf of Oman were followed by Iran shooting down a US surveillance drone. President Trump's counter strike on Iran was called off minutes before execution and made public, feeding the perception that he is reluctant to directly engage in Middle East security concerns. Confidence in the US was further shaken when, in the wake of the drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities in September 2019, Trump noted 'that was an attack on Saudi Arabia, and it wasn't an attack on us'. This was despite his assurance a day earlier that the US was 'locked and loaded' to respond to the attacks (Holland and Gamal 2019).

In this context, it is understandable to see Emirati leaders make contingency plans. Domestically, these plans concern accelerating the development of an indigenous defence industry to produce armoured vehicles and drones to reduce reliance on foreign suppliers. Externally, contingency plans feature outreach to other extra-regional powers, although these relationships 'are expected to complement and supplement, not replace, the US security cover' (Hoyakem and Roberts 2018). Among these, China and Russia appear to be of significant potential.

### **Bilateral relationships in focus**

Having contextualized the UAE's interests at the state, regional, and international levels, this section analyses the Gulf region and UAE from an outside-in approach. How does this region meet the interests of extra-regional power, and how are they pursuing these interests? How does each bilateral relationship with the UAE contribute to achieving these interests? In examining the cases of the China-UAE and Russia-UAE relationship, we can better understand how external powers are approaching the Gulf in a period of considerable flux.

#### *China-UAE relations*

Nathan and Scobell use a concentric circles model to analyze China's foreign policy. The first circle, China's sovereign territory, is the dominant security concern for decision-makers in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The next circle is the twenty states that share borders and maritime boundaries with China. The third circle consists of six regional orders (North-East Asia, continental South-East Asia, maritime South-East Asia, Oceania, South Asia, and Central Asia) that are home to direct Chinese security-related interests. It is

only when we get to the fourth circle—the rest of the world—that we find the UAE (Nathan and Scobell 2012, 3–7). This reinforces Niblock’s assertion that the Gulf is not a core interest for China (Niblock 2015, 16–18). While the region may still be on the periphery of Beijing’s strategic calculus, it is growing in significance, as are several states and regions where China has traditionally had a marginal presence. During a 2013 CCP conference on foreign affairs, President Xi Jinping exhorted, ‘We must be more proactive in seeking achievements in the conduct of our peripheral diplomacy’ (China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development 2013). The phrase ‘be proactive in seeking achievements’ has come to be used as a shorthand for a stronger Chinese foreign policy during the BRI era, signaling that China is transitioning from a power with global interests into a global power. Its growing presence in the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular is consistent with this doctrine (Fulton 2019a).

China’s interests in the Gulf region are based in access to energy for domestic and global markets, freedom of navigation, and cooperation in BRI implementation. Underlying each of these is a need for a stable regional environment, and the UAE is the Gulf state that is perceived as the most capable of contributing to this. The China-UAE relationship was established as a strategic partnership in 2012 and elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2018 during a state visit from President Xi. This is the highest level of partnership in China’s hierarchy of diplomatic relations, and signals that the partnering state is considered to play an important role in international political and economic affairs. In the joint communique China expressed support for ‘the constructive role being played by the UAE in regional affairs’ (The National 2018b). Other GCC states—Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait—have strategic partnerships, but not at the comprehensive level, indicating that they are perceived as less important to Beijing.

While Saudi Arabia and Iran also both enjoy comprehensive strategic partner status with China, neither offers as much as the UAE. Iran is an important relationship for China, yet its status as a revisionist regional power undermines the stability Beijing prizes, with aggression against its GCC rivals and material support for groups that challenge Middle East states—Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. The BRI is in essence a series of projects about connectivity and Iran has less to offer in this regard so long as it remains on the outside of the Middle East status quo. Its economic utility has been marginalized by sanctions, and other Gulf states and Russia have easily picked up the slack in providing China with the energy it no longer receives from Iran. While there is significant potential for the China-Iran relationship, Tehran’s outsider status means that potential is likely to remain unfulfilled.

Saudi Arabia is also a major Chinese partner, but it does not have the same depth of relations as the UAE enjoys. One issue is the perception that Saudi Arabia is a more challenging business environment to operate in than the UAE. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been actively signing contracts throughout Saudi Arabia, capitalizing on the synergy between Saudi Vision 2030 and the BRI. At the same time, many of these SOEs have opted to use the UAE as a Middle East base of operations, setting up regional headquarters in Dubai (Fulton 2018, 145). This is largely because of the UAE’s much stronger transportation and logistics infrastructure, its well-established

financial institutions, and the country's business-friendly environment. In 2020, the UAE ranked as the top Middle East state in the World Bank's Doing Business Report and sixteenth globally, while Saudi Arabia ranked sixty-second (The World Bank 2020). A Chinese banker noted the difference between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, explaining that in Saudi 'there are fewer Chinese companies as they find it more difficult to manage the cultural differences' (Dudley 2014). As a result, China's expatriate community in the UAE, estimated at over 200,000, is its largest in the Middle East, with over 4,200 Chinese companies operating in the Emirates (Abdul Kader 2016). While both Saudi Arabia and Iran are important to China, neither meets the same range of Chinese interests with the depth that the UAE does, making it Beijing's most mature Middle East relationship.

Economic relations are the bedrock of China's engagement with the UAE. Bilateral trade has grown exponentially from \$2.5 billion in 2000 to nearly \$51 billion in 2019 (IMF Direction of Trade Statistics). China consistently ranks as the UAE's top source of imports and among its top five export destinations, with a balance of trade that favours China. This is unique among Gulf economies; the UAE and Bahrain are the only two states that consistently import more from China than they export to it. In Bahrain's case this is a result of minimal trade relations—its economic relations with China are negligible. The UAE, however, has dense and multifaceted economic relations with China. For China, the UAE's primary significance lies as a re-export hub for Chinese products to the rest of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe; 60% of the UAE's imports from China are subsequently re-exported. China is partially financing the expansion of container-handling capacity at Abu Dhabi's Khalifa Industrial Zone, the expansion of Dubai's main airports, and the building of the Hassyan clean coal plant in Dubai. At the same time, China is also collaborating with UAE companies such as DP World to build an integrated warehousing and distribution point in Yiwu, China, location of the largest wholesale consumer goods market in the world.

Oil also lubricates Sino-UAE economic relations. Although more than half of China's oil imports originate from the Middle East, the UAE accounts for only 2.5% of China's total crude oil imports (resourcetrade.earth, 2000–2017). The UAE's value lies in the fact that it is the only Gulf country whose hydrocarbon sector is open to foreign investment. Chinese energy companies hold a 12% stake in Abu Dhabi's onshore oil concession, the largest share granted to a foreign partner. Moreover, China appreciates that the UAE has consistently advocated for moderate global oil prices so as not to hurt global growth. In addition, the UAE has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment as a reliable oil supplier through its multiple oil export routes and crude storage facilities in Asia. China's non-oil exports and focus on infrastructure projects complement the UAE's intent to diversify its economy. At the same time, China's stake in the UAE's oil sector helps to lock in demand for the UAE's oil since 9.5% of its crude oil exports in 2017 are destined for China.

The centrality of economic ties to the China-UAE relationship means that both parties are similarly invested in keeping the US engaged in the Gulf. This is because the US's commitment to freedom of navigation, security, and international law in the maritime commons has bolstered bilateral trade and

investment flows. China has little incentive to challenge America in the Middle East; in fact, their regional interests align more often than not.

At the same time, in the context of the BRI, China appears to be making provisions for a future in which it may have to play a larger role in securing its overseas economic interests, and this has the potential to affect the Gulf and its constituent states. The BRI, announced in 2013, is the largest foreign policy initiative ever introduced by China. Consisting of an overland and a maritime route—the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative—the BRI is a series of Chinese-led projects that initially were designed to reach across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean region (IOR), but has since expanded to include much of the world and into space. Infrastructure investment is one of the key priorities of the BRI, an area where Chinese private and state-owned enterprises enjoy a particularly good international reputation and established presence. A 2009 report from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated that Asia was in need of \$8 trillion of investment into infrastructure between 2010 and 2020 (The Economist 2015). Since then, projected infrastructure requirements have expanded tremendously, with a 2017 report from the ADB claiming that developing Asia is in need of \$26 trillion – or \$1.7 trillion per year – in order to maintain growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and address climate change (Asian Development Bank 2017, xi). As such, there is a tremendous appetite for Chinese investment projects through the BRI, and several states across Eurasia and the IOR are engaging with China, either as investors or recipients.

The UAE is especially active in the BRI. Mubadala, Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund, has partnered with China Development Bank and China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange to develop the UAE-China Joint Investment Fund. Capitalized with \$10 billion and equally funded by the two states, it is being used to finance jointly approved investments of 'strategic and commercial importance' (Mubadala 2019). Abu Dhabi Global Market, the international financial center, has announced the approval of a Chinese state-owned financial services firm that would 'provide strategic investment and financial support as part of the Belt-and-Road initiative' (Abu Dhabi Global Market 2018).

While Dubai is the commercial hub of Chinese activity in the UAE, Abu Dhabi is growing in importance as the BRI comes to play a larger role in the bilateral relationship. In 2017, its industrial park and port complex, Khalifa Port Free Trade Zone (KPFTZ) and Khalifa Industrial Zone Abu Dhabi (KIZAD), signed a 50-year lease with Jiangsu Provincial Overseas Cooperation and Investment Company Limited (JOCIC) a Chinese provincial consortium. This initial contract, valued at \$300 million, has led to multiple other investments. One of the investments was a 35-year concession agreement between KIZAD and COSCO shipping, valued at \$738 million, that will double the container-handling capacity of the port. In early 2018 several Chinese companies signed over \$1 billion worth of agreements in KPFTZ across a range of sectors, including construction, manufacturing, trade and logistics. The significance of these deals came into sharper focus in the summer of 2018 during the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum's Ministers' Meeting in Beijing, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced the 'Industrial Park – Port Interconnection, Two – Wheel and Two – Wing Approach', a regional BRI-

program that is designed to link Chinese business clusters and supply chains in strategically-located facilities, connecting Chinese investments from the Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. Abu Dhabi's KPFTZ, Oman's Duqm port, the People's Liberation Army Navy Supply Base in Djibouti, and Port Said in Egypt are the four ports, and KIZAD, Duqm, Jazan in Saudi Arabia, and Ain Sokhna in Egypt are home to the industrial parks (Fulton 2019b). Collectively, these projects establish a physical architecture for the BRI in the Middle East and indicate the cities and states that China considers as strategically important partners. Abu Dhabi's significance in this park-and-port project was further reinforced in 2019 when East Hope Group, one of China's largest companies, announced that it is considering a \$10 billion investment in KIZAD, a project that its chief executive officer described as 'the benchmarking project along the BRI between China and the UAE' (Reuters 2019).

Therefore, the UAE is an important entry point into an increasingly important region to Beijing. Through building on strong commercial relations, China has deepened cooperation through the comprehensive strategic partnership and BRI projects. Despite the centrality of the US in the UAE's foreign and security policies, this attention from China presents an opportunity to diversify its extra-regional relationships, and China's BRI provides investment opportunities in emerging markets as well as a role in a potential order-shaping program for Eurasia and the IOR. For Emirati leaders, this represents a convergence of several interests, and indicates a trajectory of deeper interdependence in coming years.

### *Russia-UAE relations*

Russia maintains the best relations with the UAE among the six member states of the GCC. This was underlined in June 2018 with the conclusion of the Russia-UAE Declaration of Strategic Partnership, the first such agreement between Russia and a Gulf state (Sim 2018b). Unlike China, the basis of Russia-Gulf engagement lies in cooperation on wider strategic issues and less on commercial exchanges.

The UAE's uncompromising stand against 'all forms of terrorism and religious extremism of any kind' (Emirates 24/7 2016) echoes the claim by Russian President Vladimir Putin that there is no such thing as 'moderate' terrorists (RT 2015). With up to 5,000 Russian citizens and 4,000 citizens from other post-Soviet states having fought in Syria and Iraq, Russia is concerned that returning militants may bolster local insurgencies in southern Russia or radicalize the large numbers of Central Asian migrants living in Russia. The latter perceives the UAE's model of development embracing religiosity and globalization, its support of local proxies in the Middle East, and its financial muscle as useful in de-escalating terrorism. For instance, the UAE's activities in Chechnya (Karasik 2017; Hauer 2018)—investing in reconstruction projects, funding an anti-extremist Islamic conference, providing financial support to small businesses such as a women-only taxi service, possibly enrolling its own forces for counter-terrorism training at Chechnya's new Russian Spetsnaz University—have facilitated the pacification of the once restive republic. For the UAE, facilitating peaceful development of a one-time haven for terrorism

complements its anti-terrorist operations in the Middle East, therefore reducing non-state threats to the UAE's regime and social stability.

Russia's second strategic concern in the Middle East is aligned with its overall goal of re-establishing itself as a great power, instead of merely a regional European power, while simultaneously curtailing the US's ability to act unilaterally (Sim 2018a). Militarily, this takes the form of an anti-access area denial (A2AD) tactic to limit the USA's freedom of maneuver in a region where it has been unchallenged by an extra-regional power since 1979. Russia has tried to realize this through sales of small volumes of ground weapons and missile defence systems along with the conclusion of the 2017 Russia-UAE agreement to purchase Sukhoi fighter jets and jointly develop combat aircraft. On the one hand, the agreement signalled the UAE's displeasure with American foreign policy in the Middle East (de Briganti 2017) and could be interpreted as a way to pressure the US to sell to the UAE the much-coveted stealth-equipped F-35 fighter jets. On the other hand, the agreement aligns perfectly with the UAE's determination to develop an indigenous defence sector for national security and diversification purposes. For Russia, the UAE's purchase of a 50% stake in Russia's VR-Technologies to jointly co-invest over \$440 million apiece to develop unmanned aerial vehicles is a welcome extension of an earlier involvement by Russia's Gorky Automobile Plant in providing engineering support for the UAE's successful NIMR armoured vehicle. There is no possibility that the UAE will replace its overwhelmingly American/European defence systems when it comes to Gulf security, but the mere presence of Russian anti-tank or air defence or combat aircraft in the UAE amplifies Russia's A2AD credentials in the Gulf.

Politically, this means that Russia must be an agenda-setter, rather than merely an agenda-taker (Gvosdev 2019) so that its interests are always taken into consideration by all parties. In this regard, Russia announced its collective security plan for the Gulf in the summer of 2019, which advocated the creation of international coalitions of Gulf states and external stakeholders including Russia, the US, the European Union, India, and China. Coming on the back of Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour and the US's Middle East Security Alliance (which has no role for Russia), Russia's proposal enables the country to claim a proactive approach. It reinforces a perception of global influence that is so crucial for Russian foreign policy while constraining US policy. Recent indications of the UAE's intentions to de-escalate conflicts with Iran, Syria, and Qatar may render it more amenable to Russia's collective security plan.

Operationally, this implies that all roads to conflict resolution in MENA should pass through Moscow; the latter's 'support opposing sides simultaneously' approach (Katz 2018) in the region makes Russia an indispensable peace broker. Syria is a case in point. Once implacably opposed to Bashir Al Assad's regime, the UAE has of late re-opened its embassy in Damascus and suggested the possibility of Syria's return to the Arab League to pre-empt further Iranian and Turkish influence in Syria. Russian mediation therefore appears to the Emirates to be the best way to extricate itself from the conflict. Russia is aware that for any political settlement to be credible and sustainable, the support of influential Arab states such as the UAE is a *sine qua non*; hence the value of its strategic relationship with the country. With reconstruction costs estimated at \$250 billion by the United Nations, Russia can ill-afford to



go it alone particularly with longer-for-lower oil prices (Dale and Fattouh 2019).

Russia's third strategic objective in terms of its relationship with the UAE is global influence over energy markets. Russia is among the top three crude oil producers in the world and its largest non-OPEC oil exporter. Hydrocarbons—and oil in particular—account for 60% of exports and 40% of federal government revenues in Russia (Mitrova and Yermakov 2019, 19). Consequently, prolonging the economic viability of oil and its associated derivatives in an age of renewable energy, climate concerns, and competition from US shale oil, is a key interest that Russia shares with the UAE. Both are key players in the OPEC+ agreement between OPEC and selected non-OPEC members to cut oil production levels and stabilize oil prices, leading from an increase of \$26 per barrel at the lowest point in 2016 to \$68 by the start of 2020 (EIA). For the UAE, this resulted in a fiscal surplus in 2019, its first since 2015. For Russia, its budget was the happy recipient of more than \$100 billion, which stabilized the economy, previously hurt by sanctions, and shored up the country's sovereign wealth fund (El Gamal and Atakhova 2019). The \$271 million purchase by Abu Dhabi's Mubadala of a 44% stake in Russia's Gazpromneft-Vostok is another example of the UAE's importance in monetizing Russia's oil sector since the cash proceeds can be used to develop other oil fields. For Abu Dhabi, the fact that some of these fields feed into the east Siberian pipeline that delivers oil to China makes this a sound, long-term investment opportunity outside of the traditional western and MENA markets. The October 2019 award of a 5% stake in Abu Dhabi's Ghasha gas concession to Russia's LUKoil further strengthens the Russia-UAE strategic cooperation in energy. It is the first upstream investment ever by a Russian company in the UAE oil industry; for a country that routinely wields hydrocarbon concessions as a tool of statecraft (Davidson 2005, 92–97), it represents an acknowledgment by the UAE of the value of Russia as a strategic stakeholder. The fact that LUKoil was one of the staunchest supporters for a continuation of the OPEC+ pact (Soldatkin 2020) reiterates the value of Russia-UAE energy relations for both countries.

Cooperation in the energy sector, however, does not preclude competition. Russian oil companies have been partly responsible for the growth in Iraqi oil production to a level that now exceeds that of the UAE. For the UAE, this has detrimental implications for power distribution within OPEC, for market share in major consuming countries such as India and China, and for regional rivalry with Iran, for whom Iraq is the 'centrepiece' (Hassan-Yari 2018, 62) of its regional influence. Nevertheless, competition for market share and doubts about the long-term sustainability of OPEC+ do not detract from the larger strategic convergence between Russia and the UAE on prolonging the oil era. This means that the US is less able to use the UAE and other Gulf states as a pressure point against the Russian economy, as was the case in the late 1980s when an oil glut put the Soviet Union under more severe financial strain.

Russia-UAE trade, which has grown from \$0.9 billion in 2010 to \$1.7 billion in 2018 (IMF Direction of Trade Statistics), is much less significant than Sino-UAE exchanges. Russia accounts for less than 0.5% of the UAE's total trade partly because of the similarities in their energy-based export economies. Still, thanks to its more diversified and business-friendly economy, as well as the



search by Russia for non-western trade partners, the UAE is Russia's largest trade partner within the GCC. It is also the second largest Gulf investor in Russia, with investments worth over \$2 billion in health, logistics, and airports. Dubai's DP World could even be interested in port management along Russia's Arctic Northern Sea Route which cuts East-West shipment time and where maritime traffic is increasing. Putin appreciates the UAE's contributions to upgrading the country's physical and human resources since these are key components of his National Projects aimed at reinvigorating the economy (Aris 2019). In turn, Russia has supported the UAE's non-oil diversification program—it trained and facilitated the mission of the UAE's first astronaut, it established a Russian Center for Digital Innovations in Dubai to incubate the development of companies focusing on artificial intelligence, it is contracted to supply nuclear fuel to the UAE's Barakah power plant, and it has proposed the localization of defense production as noted above.

Russia's interests diverge the most with the UAE over Iran and Turkey. Russia facilitated the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, disagrees with the anti-Iran prism that colors interactions in the Middle East (Wright 2018), and is helping Iran evade sanctions on the sale of its oil much to the UAE's chagrin. Challenges plague the Russia-Iran relationship but are not significant enough to cause a rupture despite the attempts of the UAE and other Gulf states to entice Russia away from Iran through inducements like trade, investment, weapons purchases, and procurement of nuclear reactors (Sim 2018a, 48). Russia's relations with Turkey are founded on more solid bases including trade, energy, and tourism flows. Turkey, for instance, is Russia's largest trade partner in the Middle East, and it is dependent on Russia for almost 60% of its natural gas imports. However, Turkey's self-perception as a natural leader of the Muslim world based on cultural affinity runs up against the UAE's implacable opposition to political Islam and to Turkey's involvement in Arab affairs, including Syria and the blockade of Qatar (Cook and Ibish 2017). Notwithstanding, leaders in the UAE may feel Russia can help to nudge Iran and Turkey into less truculent behavior (Asmar 2019). While a shared perspective in favour of illiberalism may facilitate cooperation, the primacy of national interests—and the extent to which they diverge as above over Turkey and Iran or converge in the case of terrorism, Russia's role in the Gulf, and energy—continues to drive these relations.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between the major powers and the UAE is changing in several ways. First, and in contrast to viewing the UAE and the Gulf merely as a zero-sum Cold War battleground, the US, China, and Russia today appreciate the UAE as a valuable interlocutor to advance commercial, energy, political, and defense interests as well as global norms such as anti-terrorism. Second, the major powers are increasingly cognizant that far from enhancing regional stability as was the case of Pax Americana in the Gulf, they may be vulnerable to 'vertical contagion' (Harrison 2018) whereby conflicts originating from the region entrap major powers, thereby rendering these conflicts more intransigent. Consequently, all of them are wary of taking on additional security commitments. In the short term, China's and Russia's wariness on the part of China

and Russia is an advantage for the US in shoring up its primacy in the Gulf. Finally, freed from the straight jacket of Cold War imperatives, domestic considerations appear to play a relatively larger role in foreign policy. Ongoing debates in the US about what a grand strategy should look like, the domestic impetus behind and sustainability of China's BRI, and the securitization of terrorism, 'popular' revolutions, and energy in Russia continue to shape and redefine their engagement with the UAE.

Have these changes resulted in 'precipitous declines' in the leverage and influence of the Western powers over the region, as Kamrava (2018, 505) has argued? This article suggests that while China and Russia have stepped up their interactions with the UAE, neither meets the same range of interests that its relationship with the US provides. Moreover, it is not simply a case whereby the UAE's economic future lies in the East while its military security lies with the West. For example, market leaders in the digitalization of the hydrocarbon industry, a practice that is regarded as imperative for the competitiveness and sustainability of the UAE's oil industry, include British and European companies like BP, Chevron, and Statoil. As for military security, it stands to reason that as China's and Russia's economic and strategic interests grow, they may pursue more proactive and aggressive regional policies to protect those interests. Already, there are suspicions that the Chinese-funded port of Gwadar in Pakistan may eventually be converted into a Chinese naval base. The changes in the UAE's foreign and domestic environments have therefore resulted in a more balanced, and yet fluid and compartmentalized, interactions with non-traditional major powers like China and Russia. The US, however, is still the UAE's most indispensable ally for now.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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