

# Treading with Caution: China's Multidimensional Interventions in the Gulf Region

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates the growing adaptability of Chinese foreign policy to Gulf states' expectations around issues that implicate them directly or are relevant (such as relations with the US, and the wars in Yemen and Syria). Gulf states reacted positively because China's approach incrementally integrated local demands in its strategizing, especially by finding common ground with Gulf states despite their own differences; China has done so while not being tied to a "hegemonic idea" (i.e. it is not trying to control or define Gulf politics). China's incrementalist and non-hegemonic regional approach significantly increased Gulf states' acceptance of its interventions, adapted to Gulf states' expectations, and, crucially, has been altering what these states expect of major powers in general. The article concludes by proposing that unfolding Gulf politics in light of the June 2017 GCC crisis is very likely to present China with multiple opportunities to demonstrate the adroitness of its strategic choices vis-à-vis the region.

**Keywords:** Gulf Cooperation Council; Iran; China; foreign policy adaptation; American strategies; Gulf crises

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All Gulf states have been seeking enhanced exchanges with China, which China has been enthusiastically reciprocating.<sup>1</sup> China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has participated in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. China conducted military exercises with Iran, coordinated anti-terrorism exercises with Saudi Arabia, set up logistics facilities (such as the agreement reached with Djibouti in 2016), inaugurated a cargo train route with Iran in 2016, and commenced a sea-line route with Qatar in 2017. Cultural ties are also expanding, especially via Confucius Institutes (for example in Iran and the United Arab Emirates – UAE), student exchange programs (for example with Qatar University), and other non-governmental initiatives (such as Huawei's technology sharing and student training programmes with local universities).

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1 This article is mostly in reference to Gulf Cooperation Council states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Kuwait) and Iran.

Gulf states' interests in deeper ties with China have been prompted by three complementary factors: first, the perception of China as a rising power with an agenda promoting consultation – not hegemony – to amend terms for global exchange; second, economic profit; third, China becoming more adept in attending to Gulf interests.<sup>2</sup>

Gulf states' preferences and strategies are greatly influenced by forms of major power interventions. Since early in the 20th century, major power interventions have been relatively well received by Gulf governments and leaders, given their own search for energy markets and trading partners, military hardware and training, and information-sharing to counter anti-government forces. Sustained interventions by major powers such as the United States and Britain produced expectations among local governments about what major powers should do; these expectations have been stable, not constant. Such expectations have influenced China's strategic approach since it is considered as a major power, and its politics are hence partly evaluated by how it conforms to rules/expectations or acts differently. Specifically, in the past decade Beijing has had to deal with a region saturated with competition and rivalries as well as very specific sets of localized foreign policy concerns; these influenced China to take a Gulf approach defined by incrementalism and caution.<sup>3</sup> Yet, China has shaped the expectations of local governments as to what constitutes major power roles.

This article demonstrates how China's foreign policy adapted to Gulf states' expectations and, crucially, has been altering such expectations. China's approach has been to build policy on grounds common to its own preferences and those of Gulf states, despite differences among the latter, on issues that implicate Gulf states directly or are relevant to them, such as relations with the United States, global energy markets and Arab Spring politics. China's stable strategy has not been tied to a "hegemonic idea": this means that China is not trying to control or order Gulf politics in the sense of defining the parameters of action for regional states. China's approach significantly increased Gulf acceptance of its mode of regional interventions.

In reaching these findings, the article problematizes what intervention means by looking at the demand side, i.e. what Gulf states have demanded and expected of major powers. Intervention is defined as the dedication of capacities (material and immaterial/ideational) to act in select theatres, be it for material gain or appropriateness. In describing multifaceted intervention processes in China's Gulf policy, intervention becomes best understood as a continuum, where economic intervention can have crucial political and security consequences just as military intervention has economic dimensions.

The article proceeds by explaining the sources and content of Gulf states' expectations of major power interventions, after which it presents China's own

<sup>2</sup> Al-Khsheiban 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Li and Yuwen 2016.

policy. It then assesses Gulf reactions, and concludes with a comment on the 2017 Gulf crisis and its implications for China.

### **Gulf States' Expectations of Major Powers**

The Gulf regional order has been generally stable since around 1980, especially its main ideological/religious fault lines, interstate rivalries and competitions, and America's regional dominance. Despite the emergence of new conflictive issues, mobile militant actors, sporadic domestic unrests and/or revolts, and diplomatic competitions and breakthroughs, overall stability (certainly not peace) remains. In such an environment, Gulf states' foreign policy has been primarily focused on two main goals: the first has been meeting global demand for hydrocarbons while monitoring competition; the second has been securing themselves from external vicissitudes. Importantly, Gulf states have over the span of their modern independence developed stable institutional – as well as personal – expectations that major power interventions will support their causes/interests.

The United States (less so Britain) since early in the 20th century has had prominent interventions in order to control rivalries (for example between Saudi Arabia and Iran), competitions (for example between Qatar and Bahrain), sectarian conflicts, and intra-GCC divergent perspectives towards Iran, Yemen, Iraq, and the space for extra-regional actors (such as Egypt or the Soviet Union).<sup>4</sup> Britain and the United States have generally reacted with a micromanagement strategy, which has encompassed the following: continued presence of military forces – especially that of the United States – in addition to diplomacy to solve the problems of allies, protect them and ensure their domestic stability; working bilaterally and via collective agreements through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); securing maritime pathways via the Combined Task Force (CTF). Micromanagement meant direct interventions with military instruments, such as deployment or maintaining local bases/facilities, as in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Military interventions in the Gulf regional order included supervision of the sorts of weapons sold to regional states, such as the United States' oversight of the China–Saudi Arabia missile deal of the 1980s; these interventions also had important economic dimensions as they helped develop a broader canvass of ties between governments.<sup>5</sup>

Major powers also helped develop oil and gas sectors and various state-building processes of Gulf states; they supported certain leaders over others to stay in power as well. The British, for example, helped the transition of the then-Trucial States into independence as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971 and backed Oman's current leader, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, against the Dhofar rebellion, after having supported Qaboos's ousting of his father Said bin Taimur. Major powers made little tangible attempt to change domestic

4 Luft 2016.

5 Kéchichian 2016.

governance practices (for example democratization) in which sitting rulers provided favourable alliances and predictability. Importantly, major power interventions built a deep repertoire of personalized ties with local elites, reaching out both to their allies and their rivals. Familiarity, partnerships and personal friendships developed at all levels of comfort with major power politics, especially with major power decision makers. Even adversaries, like the United States and Iran, developed a level of knowledge which allowed a more accurate analysis of the others' interests and policies.<sup>6</sup> Gulf states developed expectations of continued micromanagement, albeit for different reasons.

Iran is generally wary of major power Gulf interventions, but especially of their direct military presence, given major power periodic violations of its sovereignty throughout the 20th century, including the imposition of various forms of sanctions. Yet, Iran developed a clear rapport in dealing with the United States (given the latter's dominance of the regional order); the two have not clashed directly and have, to the contrary, converged around a rational strategic order in the Gulf, as well as tacit joint concerns about rising Sunni religious extremism (represented most clearly by the Islamic State – IS). Moreover, Iran's foreign policy at least since the 1980s has been in rivalry with many of its neighbours. Therefore, paradoxically, an Iranian interest in American micromanagement stems from the fact that it allows Iran to focus energies on dealing primarily with the US on security matters, and is formed by an Iranian expectation that the United States knows how to reassure GCC states especially, and thus contain them.

GCC states developed an expectation that major powers should interfere to support their security-seeking – in diplomacy, military hardware and training – against Iran, as well as provide a security umbrella to shelter them from others (for example Iraq). American commitments to GCC security have been critical and are likely to continue well into the foreseeable future, given hindrances to an indigenous GCC security regime. While GCC states have sought harmonization of security preferences, and means of achieving them, they hold divergent perceptions of the magnitude and location of threats, are not united on a common long-term defence posture, and have not reached a framework independent of the United States.<sup>7</sup> The 2017 embargo on Qatar exposed a deep and difficult-to-bridge chasm in intra-GCC relations, and thus revealed how critical American support is regionally. Despite surfacing (and growing) divisions among GCC members, they still expect the United States to play a mediating and interventionist role in regional politics; what is perhaps changing, and that this article will seek to highlight, is how this intervention occurs.

We can appreciate, based on the above, why America's "rebalancing to Asia" – particularly by directing attention away from the Gulf – animated GCC discussions

6 Woodward 2004.

7 To diminish dependence on major powers for security, GCC states created the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) in the early 1980s, the Gulf Security Agreement in Manama in 2000, then the Rapid Intervention Force in 2009. To increase strategic coordination and effectiveness, in December 2013, the GCC set up a unified command structure. Saidy 2016, 119.

about their security needs; we can also appreciate why signing the Iranian nuclear deal considerably fomented a credibility gap in GCC perceptions of American commitments to their security – despite American assurances. In the lead-up to the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, and especially in the May 2015 Camp David GCC–United States meeting, not only did GCC states seek revamped American security assurances which signalled that their security options remain with Washington, but also confirmed that intervention in their favour was necessary and expected from the United States.<sup>8</sup> GCC states and the US then met in Riyadh in a second summit in less than a year (April 2016) in which the United States confirmed its strong commitment to its Gulf allies despite the Iran nuclear deal (which had yet to be finalized). Hence, the Riyadh and Camp David summits, from a GCC perspective, were improvements in the relationship with the United States.<sup>9</sup> In them was reflected how even the prospect of American intervention generates comfort for GCC states; equally, prospects of non-intervention are unnerving.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the United States–GCC credibility gap was deepened by the non-punishment of the Syrian government’s violations of “red lines,” (when chemical weapons were used), and a rather lukewarm American reaction to IS relative to the magnitude of threat posed to America’s allies.

For Iraq, and especially after the 2003 American invasion that decimated local security institutions, political parties have sought external support, from Iran as well as the United States. Since then, the government in Baghdad and the Kurdish government in the North have developed their own approaches to how the region should be run, thus two different visions/expectations of major power roles. Meanwhile for Yemen, the American rebalancing to Asia, the Iran nuclear deal, and Washington’s regional “counter-terrorism” measures all intersected to translate into larger American support for the Saudi Arabia-led war.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, Gulf states have expected major power security micromanagement; the practice in case of an emergency, for example, has been for Gulf states to first call upon Washington. Recall that expectations are stable but not constant, and while they are likely to influence what the Gulf asks of China, the latter is bound to leave its imprint – especially should China be seen as an alternative pole to the US, or frame its policy as such.

## China’s Gulf Policy

In a stable Gulf regional order, China has incrementally developed policies that have expanded its economic interests and diplomacy ties without violating regional states’ expectations or sense of security, and without violating American politics there. China’s approach has over the years introduced changes to such

8 AbdelAziz Aluwaisheg. 23 November 2016.

9 AbdelAziz Aluwaisheg. 28 April 2016.

10 Alsuhaيمي and Alqudsi 2015.

11 Zenko 2015.

expectations – especially in the past decade – mainly because Gulf states have been interested in exploring such an approach which delivers support without threats to sovereignty. Simultaneously, however, Gulf states remain generally approving and demanding of American micromanagement that places restraints on sovereignty. Such paradoxical rules of the Gulf regional order complicate China’s foreign policy strategizing. As the conclusion to this article will note, the June 2017 intra-GCC crisis magnified the shortcomings of micromanagement for Gulf states; the crisis simultaneously valorized (and continues to do so) non-violating/non-meddling approaches – such as those of China.

During the Cold War, China pursued a containment of Soviet influence in Western Asia after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, but faced Moscow’s larger regional leverage in Iraq (as well as in Syria and Egypt).<sup>12</sup> Under Mao, China materially and rhetorically supported Gulf revolutionaries, framing them as liberators from British imperialism; these Chinese interventions soured ties with internationally recognized Gulf governments. In Iran under the monarchy, Beijing supported the *Tudeh* (Communist party); in Oman, it backed actors in the Dhofar Rebellion (which raged between 1962 and 1975) against the Omani Sultanate, and then briefly supported the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf which emerged after the end of the Dhofar rebellion.<sup>13</sup>

However, the core of China’s Gulf strategy – which remains to this day – crystallized mostly after 1970. One indicator of change was China ending support for Omani insurgents while their struggle continued; this came at a time when (primarily) Iran and Kuwait were lending support to Qaboos’s government. After China’s altered policy, Oman and China established diplomatic ties in 1978, and Oman was the first Arab state to sell oil to China in 1983.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, despite China having recognized Kuwaiti independence in 1961 and courting it for trade deals, relations improved only after Beijing ended its intervention in Oman. Kuwait–China diplomatic ties were established in 1971, with the first trade agreement concluded in 1977.<sup>15</sup> Beyond hydrocarbons and trade, China used sports to forge common ground between itself, Kuwait and Iran in the mid-1970s. China supported Kuwait and Iran’s joint efforts to host the Asian Olympic Games in Tehran in 1974, which gained Beijing significant political capital in these two Gulf countries.<sup>16</sup> Another significant indicator of China changing was accepting the American-brokered “twin pillar” Iran–Saudi Arabia arrangement (set in the 1970s); this did not, however, remove Saudi Arabia’s caution (even non-approval) vis-à-vis China.

China’s Gulf policy post-1970 was driven by a principled position of non-interference in the domestic politics of states, and calculations of containment

12 Calabrese 1990, 864–66.

13 Zhongmin 2016, 4–5.

14 Olimat 2012, 28.

15 Calabrese 1990, 869.

16 Behbehani 1981, 229–231.

and deterrence vis-à-vis major powers.<sup>17</sup> It was influenced by, among others, Deng Xiaoping's drive to "de-ideologize" Chinese foreign policy, seek trading partners via the global capitalist economy, and defuse potential for global or regional confrontations with the United States.<sup>18</sup> The Gulf offered China opportunities to display its policy line. After the 1973 Arab–Israel War, the United States and European states embarked on serious diversifications of energy options, while Gulf states' interests in new oil markets increased, given the potential decline in Western demand. Moreover, hydrocarbon rents post-1973 bloated Gulf states' budgets; financial surpluses shaped social contracts between Gulf governments and their societies where imports satisfied domestic demand and, significantly, substituted a momentum to industrialize which carried the risk of labour developing political agendas. In essence, trade with China (and others) supported domestic political interests of Gulf governments by providing a wide range of consumer goods,<sup>19</sup> thus, a perceived and real converging in China and Gulf states' interests in trade. The fact that social contracts in the Gulf remain in place – despite adjustments – underscores the importance of trade with China today. Moreover, from a Gulf perspective, solidarity emerged among them as states sharing similar developmental/political interests.

The Gulf of the 1980s provided China with several opportunities to be present. During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1987) Chinese interventions complemented American ones: China supplied arms to Iran and Iraq – sales to Iran aimed to distance Tehran from the Soviet orbit, given American backing of Iraq. Sales to Iraq supported Saudi Arabia's pro-Iraq policy.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Saudi Arabia then vocalized resistance to a second communist major power, while recognizing Taiwan as the sole representative of the Chinese people (a position which Riyadh ended in 1990). Still, China sold Saudi Arabia arms and ignored Riyadh's Taiwan position.<sup>21</sup> From China's perspective, since Saudi Arabia was a close American ally and a regional power, courting it helps Beijing normalize/stabilize global ties. In essence, China's provision of military aid affirmed Saudi Arabia's expectation of major power support.

Moreover, the Gulf furnished "Post-Mao" reformist China with opportunities to display its idea of intervention as mediation without compromising state sovereignty. China supported international mediation initiatives between Iran and Iraq via the United Nations (UN). Moreover, China's refusal to help protect oil tankers in the Gulf (citing operational and logistical inability to do so – which was likely a plausible explanation given the status of the PLA Navy then) did not deter Kuwait's disposition; Kuwait actually hoped that China would become *more*

17 Bin Huwaidin 2002, chapters 5 and 6.

18 Two other important factors were the USSR–Iraq and USSR–India improved relations in the early 1970s. Garver 2013, 72–74.

19 Behbehani 1981, 224–26.

20 Bin Huwaidin 2002, 117–19.

21 Olimat 2012, 28.

involved in mediating, given its closeness to both Iran and Iraq.<sup>22</sup> Later, China backed the call for Iraq's unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait; in such a posture, Beijing advocated for protecting state sovereignty, however, and still smarting from the post-Tiananmen ostracism, also demonstrated support for an international pro-American consensus which promised a way out of its diplomatic isolation. China also abstained on voting on the 1991 UNSC resolution on Iraq's violence against a Kurdish insurgency, framing its position in support of Iraqi sovereignty; China's position on the Kurdish issue was critiqued as inhumane, but its (consistent) policy position was that it did not create humanitarian norms, nor seeks to actively violate them, or violate state sovereignty.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1990s as well, China continued bilateral ties with Iran under the sanctions regime, including arms sales, in ways that did not violate America's policies, such as refraining from the sales of advanced weapons systems. For the GCC, China not violating America's policies was in their favour, considering that the United States was their primary security provider. For Iraq, China continued to be a significant economic partner and benefitted handsomely in the midst of a series of conflicts (from the war with Iran, to the Kuwait invasion and subsequent international monitoring). Later, in voting for UNSCR 1441 to require that Iraq submit to UN monitoring regarding the 2002 crisis of its alleged WMD acquisition, China did not violate an international consensus on issues of global import such as proliferation. China later had strong reservations regarding the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 – especially when the UN was being bypassed – but without forming a political blocking front. China's position, however, signalled its disapproval of such policies to the UN – policies which the United States had also pursued in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, on the eve of the new millennium, the Gulf facilitated China's pursuit of a resource/trade-driven diplomacy defined by: mutually beneficial agreements; no political involvement in sovereign governments' affairs; and little interest in detailed personalized dealings with only lukewarm enthusiasm to invest the diplomatic apparatus to mediate local conflicts or bridge personality (or familial/tribal) clashes. China's approach to regional intervention did not satisfy all of the Gulf state's expectations of major power politics, yet still delivered on issues of primary importance (trade and military sales). Roughly since a decade ago, China's stable approach has started to become increasingly palatable in the Gulf, and consequently has altered Gulf expectations of major power roles.

### China's Adaptive Gulf Interventions in the New Millennium

China's Gulf policies accommodated other major powers' interests such as with Russia (over Syria), NATO (over Libya) and the United States (towards Iran's

22 Bin Huwaidin 2002, 194–97.

23 Shichor 1992.

24 Garver 2013, Table 1.



nuclear file). Chinese decision makers have simultaneously been nervous about what they evaluated as United States' attempts at forced regime change in Western Asia and North Africa, as well as about competition over strategic interests in Taiwan and the South China Sea. China supported internationally recognized governments while advocating political dialogue; examples include Syria and Iraq after the 2012 escalation of violence, and then again in 2016 when the scene seemed more amenable to dialogue when Russia's intervention undercut the influence of IS (ending it almost entirely in early 2018); in both cases Beijing was basically trailing behind Russia.<sup>25</sup> Successive Chinese UNSC vetoes over Syria early in the conflict (October 2011 to July 2012) were significantly criticized as interventions favouring an illegitimate political order. China's policies have since been evaluated as less "abrasive" once the conflict itself morphed into something that many have invested in ending at any cost, and China became more proactive in explaining its position and adapting its interventions.

While China's West Asia and North Africa policy is still developing, over the past few years, it has become "more mature, flexible, and sophisticated."<sup>26</sup> Driven by careful attention to regional dynamics, China pursues a policy of "constructive intervention": a risk-averse posture which eschews acting against sitting governments facing domestic opposition (a longstanding Chinese position). The Arab Spring stirred debates in Beijing around global roles and the conditions under which China should pursue alternate forms of intervention, fearing a demonstration effect as a result of Arab Spring protests. Many in China saw Arab Spring protests as pushed by the West in the name of regime change, along similar lines as the "colour revolutions" in the former USSR during the previous decade. Since 2011, some in Beijing proposed that China provide aid in the form of a "Chinese Marshall Plan" to help in political transitions, and thus gain political influence at a time when the EU and the United States face financial difficulties; detractors, however, cited the weak infrastructure and industrial bases of the region's societies as not having viable strategic potential for China.<sup>27</sup>

China's developing position on intervention does not preclude moving in to define the politics of security conditions in states or regions when there is international consensus to do so, or under conditions of major power multilateralism; its "red line" remains regime change. Moreover, acting under an umbrella provided by regional organizations such as the UN or the Arab League or the African Union assumes that these organizations add legitimacy to out-of-region actors. Two indicators of change in strategy (not the "red line") in China's approach were first opting out of the NATO-led operations in Libya, but then accepting cohabitation with international forces for the aim of regional

25 Li and Cui. 2012.

26 Yun Sun 2012.

27 Sun and Zoubir 2014, 2–12.

peacekeeping from the base in Djibouti.<sup>28</sup> This could be explained mainly as a result of growing Chinese economic dependence on Western Asia and the Indian Ocean. The results have been positive for China: its companies are back negotiating deals in Libya, while its military is securing maritime routes.<sup>29</sup> While the Libyan conflict widened intra-GCC fractures, China has been able to develop relations on both the Libyan front (with the internationally recognized “Libyan Government” which has been supported by influential regional states, especially Egypt) as well as on multiple GCC fronts (notably the UAE and Qatar) while disentangling these stresses from each other.<sup>30</sup> China’s foreign policy strategizing around common denominators has been more visible in several fields of action, some of which will be interrogated briefly below.

### *China’s major power credit*

The GCC had a negative reaction to China’s UNSC vetoes on Syria, vocalized most clearly by Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup> From China’s perspective, its position on Syria emerged from its concern over what it sees as the ease with which the United States and its allies intervene to change regimes or define regional orders, and it thus found convenience in Russia’s position in not allowing a UNSC Libyan-styled operation in Syria. China supported pursuing a domestically agreed upon transition in Syria.<sup>32</sup> GCC perspectives on China softened as a result of active Chinese diplomacy to explain its position, as well as efforts at cementing mutual interests (in addition to the Syrian war frustrating GCC strategies).<sup>33</sup>

More broadly, China’s support of American-led regional initiatives increased its political capital since such a position reflected a strategic conversion of interests with the US, and thus with Gulf states’ own (despite their generally divergent preferences). Moreover, China’s role in the Iran nuclear issue was facilitated by a “rational” Iranian position in a region witnessing a seriously divided Iraq, a collapsing Syria, a still unstable Afghanistan, and concerns with IS-related activities or splinter groups. It was also significant for China that on the eve of the

28 Djibouti’s Foreign Minister explains that a Chinese base would operate counter-piracy and counter-terrorism campaigns alongside the US, EU, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia; see interview with *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* [in Arabic] (4 December 2016): <https://goo.gl/4hSgj5>. Accessed 22 November 2018.

29 Libya’s Transitional Council had announced they will not do business with Chinese (and Russian) companies, at a time when they had significant investments in the country. Relations improved, and in March 2016 China declared its support for the internationally recognized Libyan government, and by late October 2016 representatives of Chinese companies met with Libyan deputies and discussed business, especially including setting up transportation networks. See “Mumathilun an sharikat Siniyya yasiloun limadinat Alzentan gharbi Libya listikshaf al-afaq wal furas al-istithmariyya” (Chinese companies representatives arrive to Alzentan in western Libya in search of investment opportunities), 30 October 2016, [http://arabic.news.cn/2016-10/31/c\\_135792204.htm](http://arabic.news.cn/2016-10/31/c_135792204.htm). Accessed 22 November 2018.

30 Cafiero and Wagner 2015.

31 Al-Tarifi 2012.

32 Pei 2012.

33 Karima 2014.

internationally backed Iraqi army attack against IS in Ramadi, the Iraqi military in December 2015 received weapons and training from Beijing.<sup>34</sup>

China's maritime coordination with NATO via the CTF serves Gulf states' interests in securing trade arteries; meanwhile China ensures safe navigation for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In broad terms, BRI is envisioned as unfolding in phases – the 1 + 2 + 3 model which starts with emphasis on energy, then is elevated to finance, and concludes with high technology.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, BRI-bilateral projects have already been launched, including a railway with Iran, transit trade via Dubai and a shipping route with Qatar. China has its own Indo-Pacific strategy with security procedures and intimate knowledge of local political-security conditions; meanwhile, its strategy in the Gulf is in the making, and its understanding growing of local enabling and disabling conditions. China has been coordinating with the US on the Gulf, and so far has isolated this region from clashing interests in the South China Sea. A related move has been China's Djibouti facility, necessary to protect assets in Africa and in Western and South Asia.<sup>36</sup>

From a GCC perspective, while China's policies reflect signs of opacity for long-term engagement and even could be seen as laced with hesitancy, these policies do not show signs of a "hegemonic plan." Meanwhile, Beijing pursues interests in coordination with major powers in ways that advance GCC states' own. While caution is perceived as necessary, given, for example, China's debated policies in African states, GCC states seem to be evaluating China's politics realistically in light of global options, and are not deterred from pursuing partnerships.<sup>37</sup>

### *China in Syria: from non-engagement to initiative-taking*

The empowerment of IS in Syria (prior to its 2018 decline) and the threats posed to Gulf states lessened criticisms of China's initial UNSC vetoes on Syria. In addition to Iran's efforts with Hezbollah and Syria's government, Saudi Arabia launched the Islamic Coalition in December 2015 to combat terrorism, identifying "radical ideology" as a distinct threat.<sup>38</sup> For China, IS attracted thousands of Uighur fighters, many of whom might make it to China with money and training. This was in addition to attacks inside China linked to Al-Qaeda and IS cells.<sup>39</sup> In consolidating their interests, Saudi Arabia and China coordinated counter-terrorism operations, and by late 2016 held their first field training exercises inside China.<sup>40</sup> This was in tandem to China's position on Syria moving from

34 At least one Chinese citizen was executed by the Islamic State. See Tiezzi 2015.

35 See the official announcement of the 2014 China-Arab Cooperation Forum (<http://english.cntv.cn/2014/06/06/VIDE1402009324468536.shtml>).

36 Panda 2017.

37 Aluwaisheg 2014.

38 For its objectives, see the Coalition's official website <https://imctc.org/English/About>.

39 Botobekov 2017.

40 "China holds first anti-terror drills with Saudi Arabia," 27 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-saudi-security/china-holds-first-anti-terror-drills-with-saudi-arabia-idUSKCN12R0FD>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

non-engagement to initiative taking – which met Iranian and Saudi Arabian (and GCC) interests.<sup>41</sup> Initiative taking, in practice, translated into China deploying its UNSC veto capacity while reiterating its goal of denying the setting of precedents for regime change – to act not only in its own interest but also that of other governments facing potential domestic contestation. China later supported a UN observer mission to Syria (which was not realized). China delivered on its support for a domestic solution in Syria by dispatching a senior military officer to search for common ground between competing parties.<sup>42</sup> Then in 2016, China reached out to local parties and proposed resumption of talks, which many in the Gulf observed closely.<sup>43</sup>

### *China and the Yemen conflict*

In the current Yemen conflict, China emphasizes the need for dialogue, and intervenes mostly through sending humanitarian aid via the internationally-recognized government. A challenge facing China, or any other actor promoting dialogue in Yemen, is that the current conflict is not one-dimensional (i.e. not simply a sectarian conflict), but has erupted against a backdrop of internal divisions and demands for inclusion that have existed since at least the mid-20th century. In these domestic competitions, actors have called upon international sponsors, including Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given the intensity of the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry, China’s posture on Yemen has been to clarify its preferences/policies there directly with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In relative terms, Saudi Arabia has been a historically significant actor in Yemen because of shared borders, societal ties and migrant labour. In Saudi Arabia’s ongoing war in Yemen, Beijing emphasized its support for the internationally recognized and Saudi Arabia-backed government, and supported a Saudi Arabian role in resolving the Yemen conflict; Beijing thus genuflected to Riyadh’s regional influence.<sup>44</sup> China, however, balanced its posture by opening doors to other actors; in particular, it received in December 2016 a delegation of Houthi representatives, who are backed by Iran, to present their views. Hosting this delegation, however, did not mean a change in China’s position of supporting the internationally recognized government.<sup>45</sup> As noted, for such balancing acts to ensure that Beijing is not embroiled in the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry, China prioritizes ties with Riyadh and Tehran. For example, on the first day of President Xi Jinping’s visit to Saudi Arabia, China affirmed support for Yemen’s Saudi Arabia-backed government, as well as for Yemen’s sovereignty. Within the week, Xi travelled to Tehran and confirmed the importance of the decades-long strategic China–Iran relationship.<sup>46</sup>

41 Mzahem, 2016.

42 Khalaf 2016.

43 Abu Mraihel 2016.

44 “Interview with Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia,” [in Arabic] *Al-Hayat*, 1 November, 2015.

45 Ramani 2017.

46 China offers support for Yemen government as Xi visits Saudi Arabia, *Reuters*, 20 January 2016.

*China's security interests with Gulf governments*

China has been attentive to the movement of radical ideas from western Asia; its Gulf policy is thus partly shaped by projected implications for domestic militancy and separatist movements.

In China, Salafis or Wahhabis ... are seen as a problematic group espousing a foreign religious-political project that constitutes a threat to traditional indigenous Islamic practices as well as a potential security threat on the national level. This view is shaped in part by China's own "War on Terror" in Xinjiang (as well as terrorism concerns in much of China), growing fears surrounding the emerging linkages between Chinese radicals ... and the Islamic State ... as well as longstanding discourses emanating from anti-Salafi groups ... which comprise the various sects of Hui Islam. Underlying all this is Saudi Arabia's role, which is seen as the source, supporter, and enabler of such groups and the ideologies they supposedly espouse.<sup>47</sup>

For many in the Gulf, China has mistreated Muslim minorities there, preventing them from publicly observing rituals like fasting and praying, among suppression of other religious freedoms. The negative view, however, cast a wide, rather inaccurate, net over religious minorities in China, especially Muslims.<sup>48</sup> The complex relationships inside China between the Hui and Uighurs, as well as the central and state governments, are generally un-nuanced in Gulf media outlets.

Gulf states and China share concerns that Islam-based political platforms may become mobilized domestically, especially in feeding separatist militant activism for China. Gulf governments, who draw legitimacy from adherence to religious practices, closely track Islamic discourses and are sensitive to religious outbidding. For its part, China was alarmed by IS execution of Chinese citizens (one hostage and three militants who were accused of deserting IS), and also by a video in Mandarin that calls upon Muslims to fight China for its oppression of Muslims (issued after a Chinese citizen was executed).<sup>49</sup>

*China's role in the Iran nuclear deal: mediation as a form of intervention*

China helped broker the Iran nuclear deal, and at a critical time when the issue was ripe and both parties were willing to explore a resolution. In its 2014 "Five Principles for a Comprehensive Solution of the Iranian Nuclear Issue," China's position attempted to guard all parties' respective sovereignties wherever piecemeal tactics and concessions were integral to a resolution of the crisis.<sup>50</sup> For Gulf states, China demonstrated that it can help via dialogue without a hegemonic agenda.<sup>51</sup> From Iran's perspective, China was able and willing to bridge-build between historically antagonistic parties (the United States and Iran) and reach common ground and facilitate easing tensions. From the GCC perspective, China proved itself to be a major power with a new mediation-centred agenda.

47 Al-Sudairi 2016, 28.

48 Al-Sudairi 2016, 27–58.

49 Khalil 2016.

50 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2014.

51 Aluwaisheg 2014.

Furthermore, from a Gulf perspective, the Chinese role in the Iran nuclear deal demonstrated important political diplomacy foresight, as China *did* work to preserve its interests with an old partner (Iran), and *did* work with – not under – the United States to reach a settlement to a very volatile and explosive issue regionally and globally, all the while demonstrating its ability to navigate Gulf politics and still emerge with good relations with the GCC, in addition, of course, to Israel. China demonstrated, thus, a sophisticated reaction: it did not confront the US, did not give up on Iran, and did not simply ignore the situation. China – for Gulf states – delivered on expectations of intervention to support them.

### *The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as economic intervention*

China has been making steady improvements in gaining Gulf political trust via its proposed developmental projects, especially the BRI. It seems very likely that China has been advancing its BRI as an anchor for a larger regional presence in Western Asia and North Africa as a whole. From the BRI, China captures political capital as well as financial rewards; it has been promoting the BRI as a project in which everybody wins under its leadership of developmental experiences, capital (both financial and a trained workforce), an industrial base, a massive domestic consumption market, and also technology.

From a Gulf perspective, the BRI started to crystallize at a convenient – even critical – time to help in the search for hydrocarbon markets which promised rents necessary to maintain their social contracts. The BRI has been a welcome “positive intervention”: Iran opened a long-haul railway system, Dubai is now viewed as an “international pivot city,” Qatar as a maritime trading partner, and Oman has developed its port facilities. Importantly, while China’s Gulf economic projects have so far been via a series of bilateral strategic partnerships and trade agreements, the BRI promises to shift this momentum towards global integration of regional economies and richer cultural exchanges. These will – as locally often argued – deepen China’s foreign policy commitments to the Gulf. Strengthening this sense of deepening Chinese commitments was its incentivizing of Gulf governments and societies to pacify their relations in search for increases in benefits from systemic opportunities such as the BRI. These incentives include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); created in 2015 and based in Beijing, AIIB membership includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, while Bahrain is a prospective member. AIIB’s selling point has been that mutual economic benefits from such projects do not come with political conditionalities. In a March 2014 visit to Beijing, Saudi Arabia’s (then Crown Prince) Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud noted a set of issues that the Kingdom expects China to attend to: regional and global disturbances that have emerged as a result of not pursuing UN goals and not enforcing its resolutions; international double standards in politics; and a growing developmental gap between

countries.<sup>52</sup> His position is echoed by many decision makers across the Gulf, but has not deterred them from exploring relations further.

Gulf states and China mutually benefit from trade in fossil fuel, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and trade in manufacturing, and have tried to better institutionalize and streamline their exchanges. The GCC–China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations in December 2016 injected an optimism that benefits would accrue to Gulf societies from lesser mutual constraints, especially in trade and tourism. While the GCC earlier in 2016 requested negotiations be resumed, they remain concerned about China’s practices (such as non-tariff barriers in metal industries).<sup>53</sup> Recall that in the 1970s, some Gulf states were interested in expanding trade with China to offset changes in domestic labour conditions; currently, sales of oil and LNG to China (and Asia) are critical sources of income for Gulf states.

Expected deliverables in funding and infrastructure for the BRI are often accompanied by local expectations that such Chinese policies will help solve deep-rooted regional developmental shortcomings, such as technology production, skilled labour and diverse locally generated high-value-added industries. Many of these shortcomings are the result of lacking strategic planning and clear deliverable-driven strategies; this derives from the broader issue of a general lack of indigenous development models in the Gulf (as is the case across Western Asia). Locally produced models are important since the BRI promises connectivity and furnishes opportunities for the local to connect with global dynamics, but still requires the local to imagine and implement alternatives. Currently, Gulf states are deeply integrated within, and heavily rely on, the workings of the global capitalist economy. Given this reality, BRI connectivity is attractive to Gulf states exactly because China remains tied to the global capitalist system and favours liberalized trade (despite a headwind from Europe and the US), and thus is not likely to clash with core American interests in Gulf trade and security. In essence, Gulf states will continue dealing with a system they know. Gulf decision makers are attentive to the fact that China’s plans place its own interests at the centre of the BRI; however, given the need for energy supplies and the region’s geographical location near Africa and Europe, China might need to roll out other plans that clearly state the importance of the Gulf in its global strategy. Both parties continue the dialogue.<sup>54</sup>

## Assessing Chinese Interventions from a Gulf Perspective

To recap: Gulf states’ expectations that China acts through certain policies are influenced, if only partly, by expectations developed in previous relations with

52 “Waly alahd yaqud ijtima ma alraees alsini” (The Crown Prince holds a meeting with the Chinese President), 13 March 2014, <http://www.alriyadh.com/917889>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

53 Free trade negotiations started in 2004 but disagreements, particularly over trade in petrochemicals, halted talks in 2009. See Althanyan 2016.

54 Mansour 2017.

the US. China, nevertheless, has not offered intervention via a micromanagement strategy, and provided few indicators of interest in developing one. Gulf states' reactions to Chinese policy have overall been positive, indicating approval of China's means of intervening. This approval potentially means an ability to play a greater future role in shaping the Gulf regional order, if Beijing is interested. Gulf states' positive reactions in turn indicate a changed set of expectations of what major powers do regionally, as well as what it is in their policy repertoire that makes them attractive allies. Opportunities to further explore relations with China emerged as the US was rethinking its own global strategy.

The "rebalancing to Asia" directed American attention elsewhere from the Gulf region; around the timeframe which saw this rebalancing materialize, Iran's relations with Europe had been improving, its relations with other Gulf states in general were also improving (despite tensions with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia), and the rivalry with Israel had stabilized.<sup>55</sup> These developments translated into decreased American direct pressures on Iran, thus leaving Tehran with greater foreign policy flexibility to pursue an improvement in relations, such as with China. Bilaterally, China has been connecting with the diversified and resurging Iranian economy, continuing a decades-long relationship. Iran–China trade ties have recently been cemented by the opening in February 2016 of the Yiwu–Tehran railway line, which holds significant promise for the reification of the BRI idea and, for Iran, the delivery of a reliable tie to a considerable market. Multilaterally, Iran has been seen as a positive contributor to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) activities, which China dominates, but it has yet to be granted membership (despite expressed Russian support). That Iran's membership had been turned down several times since 2008 could be explained by the divergence in Chinese–Russian perspectives on Iran's general regional politics as well as in Iran's relations with the United States; SCO members generally do not agree in their assessment of Iranian policies.<sup>56</sup> Iran continues to express interest in joining the SCO especially given the benefits accrued from being part of its network, in terms of economic ties and political support.<sup>57</sup>

For their part, GCC states' increased acceptance of a Chinese role in the Gulf has been driven – if only partly – by the necessity to expand hydrocarbon sales. GCC states do not see how exactly they are included in the BRI; benefits are forecast to accrue with more locally instituted economic reforms.<sup>58</sup> GCC states are generally unnerved by strong ties developing between China and Iran, especially in the military field, as well as by the way in which China is acting in the Syrian war.<sup>59</sup> These concerns are likely to continue impacting GCC perceptions of China's Gulf policies. Moreover, GCC states (like Saudi Arabia) are wary of American military installations in the neighbourhood – especially a ballistic

55 Allison 2016.

56 Akbarzadeh 2015.

57 Scita 2018.

58 Mansour 2017.

59 Garver 2016.



missile defence system – that risk replicating a competitive geopolitical climate with Russia or China. America’s regional presence, especially its military bases, which include its largest global post in Qatar, already tie Gulf states to American interests. The attraction of looking to China as a partner emerges from the reality that China has no declared or historical counter-American Gulf policy, yet has presented discourses and postures that signal it can complement established Gulf–America ties, rather than replace them.<sup>60</sup>

A challenge for China is that while Gulf states have themselves not developed comprehensive strategies to manage regional security, they expect something of the sort from Beijing. An important factor that facilitates major power–regional security relations is the alignment of interests between providers and recipients, where the interests of recipients cannot fundamentally contradict the interest of the provider, often a major power patron. China has first-hand knowledge of Gulf politics and its local ties are growing in strength, but today still only remain minimal. GCC states and the US have had significant common ground on which they agree, despite occasional disagreement on specifics. This has been especially true in regard to how both parties see 1) the shape of the regional order; 2) who is considered a threat within it; and 3) who potential allies or friends are. The security interests of GCC states remain focused on guarding against threats in their geographic vicinity: in particular, their concerns in regard to Iran, Israel and the IS or groups of its ideological inclinations and strategies. The degree of convergence between China and GCC states on these three dimensions today is unclear; trade and energy interests are clearer than security ones. Iran–China relations are strong and developing firmly. The reality is that “there is nothing comparable to the close and genuinely strategic Sino-Iranian partnership in Sino-Saudi ties,” and this seems to be the issue GCC states are concerned about.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, private Chinese business interests have thus far met many Gulf expectations. An example was the 2015 sale of Chinese militarized unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Iraq, purportedly to help in the war against IS. China also sold the UAE and Saudi Arabia UAVs to help boost the war effort in Yemen; this sale in 2015 came on the heels of the US not delivering on a request for such machines by Gulf governments.<sup>62</sup> China is not a signatory to the 2014 Arms Trade Treaty, yet tends to adhere to them; nevertheless, the non-signatory status means that it does not impose lots of restrictions on buyers, or have technical or domestic/human-rights-based impediments, even if it still faces American and other influences in regional markets. Such Chinese behaviour has invited interesting reactions from authors sensitive to human rights concerns – and which are likely to continue.<sup>63</sup>

60 See Darwish 2016.

61 Garver 2016, 6.

62 Weinberger 2018.

63 Especially that UAVs can be used against civilian populations, such as in devastated and impoverished Yemen, and thus highlight problems in a business only approach. Shalabi 2014.

China's 2016 Arab Policy Paper (APP), in addition to incremental progress made in GCC–China FTA negotiations noted above, sent a clear message of intent to mobilize resources to coordinate multiple interests with local parties, and was well received in the Gulf, in particular praising the BRI's developmental potential and promises to complement existing relations. Personal discussions with Chinese observers reveal two findings. First, that China will continue to incrementally invest resources in the Gulf and figure out how the region fits into its grand global strategy.<sup>64</sup> The second is that the Gulf will benefit from the connectivity envisioned in the BRI proposal, which is also in the making. Iran observers note the speed with which trade relations are moving, hence the mutual understanding. GCC observers note that the question of GCC fit with BRI deserves more policy attention in comparison to how Iran–China relations are expanding; demand for clarity in China's policies indicates an interest in exploring further options. While GCC states in general remain unsure of their position on the BRI map, the relationship is not static. In January 2017, a direct maritime shipping service between Qatar and Shanghai was inaugurated, (a three-week journey), which is projected to increase trade incrementally.<sup>65</sup> Such a significant move is likely to increase China's involvement in securing relevant maritime pathways.

Meanwhile, people-to-people ties are growing. Especially in the UAE and Iran, China's Confucius Institutes are welcomed as mediums for social and cultural exchange. In the UAE, 200,000 people, constituting 10 per cent of Dubai's residents (in December 2015) were Chinese, reflecting a robust trade interest between the two states. Chinese traders have been particularly active in Dubai in reaching out to Western Asian and North African markets; to cater to such growing demands, a Chinese Business Hub was inaugurated in Dubai in 2017, aiming to facilitate Chinese companies setting up in the UAE.<sup>66</sup> Chinese companies, such as Huawei, have helped cement technology transfer and adaptability with Bahrain.<sup>67</sup> Other forms of exchange have been the China–Qatar year of cultural exchange (in 2016) and several exchange programmes between Qatar University and Peking University.<sup>68</sup>

## In Lieu of Concluding

The onset of a significant intra-GCC crisis in June 2017 came about when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain (as well as Egypt) imposed an air, sea and land

64 See also Sun and Zoubir 2014, 12.

65 "Mwani Qatar begins direct service to Shanghai," *The Peninsula*, 29 January 2017, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/29/01/2017/Mwani-Qatar-begins-direct-service-to-Shanghai>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

66 "The Business Gateway to Dubai for Chinese Companies just got easier via the Chinese Business Hub," *MENA Herald*, 7 November 2017, <https://www.menaherald.com/en/business/transport-logistics/business-gateway-dubai-chinese-companies-just-got-easier-chinese>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

67 "Bahrain partners with China's Hebei region to establish business ties," *MENA Herald*, 21 November 2018, <https://www.menaherald.com/en/business/events-services/bahrain-partners-china%E2%80%99s-hebei-region-establish-business-ties>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

68 "QU hosts students from China," *The Peninsula*, 23 February 2016, <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/news/qatar/371570/qu-hosts-students-from-china>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

access ban against Qatar, accusing the latter of being sympathetic to terrorist organizations and undermining GCC collective interests, claims that Doha vociferously denies. Given the deep fissures in GCC interests that surfaced, the event will likely have a permanent impact on them as a group of once like-minded states. This places interested non-GCC actors, including the United States and China, in a difficult position to navigate regional tensions.

The crisis magnified a changing rule in the Gulf regional order: moving towards distinctly assertive and independent foreign policy postures, as exhibited by Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman. In this environment, it is very likely that local states will be less open to major power interventions that confine their politics, and will simultaneously seek arenas in which to demonstrate their sovereign independence; both such dynamics are within China's foreign policy comfort zone. Indeed, the Chinese reaction to the crisis, expressed during official meetings with GCC ministers, is for GCC states to find their own political ways to resolve tensions and work together to maintain GCC unity.<sup>69</sup> Complications of the crisis might carry with it a mixed bag of results for China, on economic as well as political and security dimensions.

China–Gulf mutual benefits from hydrocarbon exports will endure until more efficient and cheaper non-hydrocarbon energy technologies emerge; the various “visions” and developmental plans which Gulf states have formulated in the past decade reflect their awareness of their dependence on global buyers (much less so than buyers' dependence on them). An important reason why Gulf hydrocarbon exports – especially LNG from Qatar – to energy-hungry China are likely to continue unchanged is the fact that GCC member states generally rely heavily on oil/gas rents to float domestic expenditures; moreover, in the past decade new competitive hydrocarbon producers have emerged. In effect, Asian markets (including in China) for Gulf exports are actually very likely to become more important, since the historic absence of collective agreements on regional institutional structures and diversification schemes (for example, financial markets, tourism and real-estate investments) is probably going to become even more acute since the June 2017 GCC crisis.

Gulf–China trade bilateralism is likely to be further consolidated, especially with forecast weakening conformity in GCC-wide positions; therefore, what will probably be a drawback for China–Gulf economic interests is progress on the GCC–China FTA negotiations. Since FTA negotiations were premised on coordination and convergence in preferences among GCC states, the depth of the fissure that the crisis exposed in GCC foreign policy preferences makes future progress uncertain. Furthermore, realization of region-wide BRI connectivities was in large part also premised on coordinated (even if not unified) GCC members' positions, as well as on gains made in FTA talks; the crisis will likely make more prominent concerns about the size of costs facing BRI-related projects if

69 “Wang Yi meets with foreign minister of Qatar: Talk about Gulf crisis again,” 20 July 2017, <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/wjyw/t1479573.htm>. Accessed 23 November 2018.

coordination among GCC members fails/retreats over which party would be willing to shoulder such costs. For China (and others) the attractiveness of the GCC coalition was the free movement of money and people across its member states as well as their coordination. By mid-August 2017, intra-GCC tensions remain high, making appropriate the questioning of the coherence and complementarity of established bilateral agreements; for example, how would Jabal Ali in the UAE serve as a transit hub to Africa coordinate/integrate with the first regional Yuan clearing centre which Qatar now operates? Economic projects, like the BRI, are thus likely to face new hurdles in accessing Gulf markets (i.e. GCC and beyond), ranging from political connections to mundane issues such as border policies and transit protocols.

The June 2017 crisis highlighted a serious drawback in GCC expectations of major power micromanagement, since this form of intervention (i.e. micromanagement) arguably helped the onset of the crisis, exposing in the process how dependent regional politics is on the performance of US administrations and personalized ties. The crisis, however, does not seem to have ended the expectation of major power intervention, thus leaving room for other models of interventions. China's incrementalist and non-hegemonic approach – which does not favour micromanagement – might be in great demand by regional actors as they move out of the crisis and, potentially, reconsider their strategic preferences vis-à-vis global options. In politics, Gulf states have in the past asked for deliverable results, showing that they are impervious to political compromise. For example, Iran's rationalist approach landed it a historic nuclear agreement, while in return for a rather muted reaction to this nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia gained support for a war on Yemen.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, Gulf states can work around major power interests if the right bargain presents itself: something that combines a larger space for sovereign independence and prioritizes economic gain. It might be very likely that China's approach further induces new standards of expectations of major powers in the Gulf.

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<sup>70</sup> Lynch 2016; Meick 2014.

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**摘要:** 本文表明，中国外交政策的适应性日益增强，因为它涉及海湾国家与美国直接相关的期望以及也门和叙利亚的战争。海湾国家的反应是积极的，因为中国的做法逐渐结合了当地的战略要求，特别是与海湾国家就自己的分歧找到共同点；中国已经这样做了，而不是被束缚于“霸权主义”（即它并不试图控制或定义海湾政治）。中国的渐进式和非霸权式的区域方式大大增加了海湾国家接受其干预措施，适应海湾国家的预期，并且最重要的是一直在改变这些国家对一般大国的期望。本文最后提出，鉴于2017年6月海湾合作委员会危机，展开的海湾政治很可能为中国提供多种机会来展示其对该地区战略选择的熟练程度。

**关键词:** 海湾合作委员会；伊朗；中国；外交政策适应；美国战略；海湾危机

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