

Gulf NATO: Examining the Aspiration Versus Architecture of GCC Security

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Gulf NATO: Aspiration Versus Architecture

The GCC lacks an equivalent to NATO's Article 5, which treats an attack on one member as an attack on all and establishes a collective defence obligation. The 2000 Joint Defence Pact instead calls for mutual consultation and cooperation in response to aggression, but does not mandate specific collective military action. Following Israel's attack on Doha on 9 September 2025, member states condemned the aggression, but invoking the defence pact remained largely symbolic (Alam, 2025).

The US-Israel war with Iran further exposed these limitations. Despite shared security concerns and economic repercussions, the GCC failed to mount a coherent, sustained response. Its defence framework lacks the legal and political certainty of NATO, while national interests often override collective defence. The GCC also lacks an integrated military command and sufficient interoperability. The Unified Military Command, established in 1982 as the Peninsula Shield Force, was intended to provide joint defence and rapid response but has largely remained a symbolic or standby mechanism, with limited deployments and minimal operational integration (Middle East Institute, 2026).

Gulf security currently encompasses safeguarding vital infrastructure and economic assets, as well as traditional military concerns. Supply chains, digital networks, energy infrastructure, and marine trade routes have become strategic weaknesses with an immediate impact on regional stability. Global markets still depend on the security of the Strait of Hormuz and vital energy infrastructure, and the need to safeguard financial systems, governmental organisations, and critical infrastructure has intensified amid expanding cyber threats. Cybersecurity has emerged as a key element of national resilience as GCC governments pursue AI, smart cities, and digital transformation through national development programs such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and similar initiatives across the Gulf.

Dissimilar military partnerships ultimately compound institutional weaknesses. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have increasingly pursued distinct security strategies. The UAE expanded military cooperation with Israel following the 2020 Abraham Accords, while Qatar strengthened its defence partnership with Türkiye after the 2017 diplomatic crisis with its neighbours. Following Israel's strike on Doha, Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Pakistan, further illustrating the tendency of GCC states to pursue bilateral security arrangements rather than rely exclusively on collective mechanisms.

The main obstacles to transforming the GCC into a NATO-like alliance are competition among members, dissimilar threat perceptions, and conflicting geopolitical priorities (Szalai, 2025). Unlike NATO, whose members broadly share strategic objectives under US coordination, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar increasingly pursue competing regional agendas. This rivalry is particularly evident in Sudan and Yemen.

In Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE support opposing sides of the conflict. The UAE backs General Hemedti Dagalo's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), while Saudi Arabia supports General al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Riyadh prioritises state stability and Red Sea security, whereas Abu Dhabi favours a militia-based approach that also advances its interests in gold and strategic ports (Gallopín, 2020). This, in turn, undermines peace efforts: while Riyadh mediates negotiations, continued UAE support for

the RSF contributes to the conflict's persistence and humanitarian crisis (Badri, 2026).

Yemen presents a similar case. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened together in 2015 against the Houthis, their objectives changed. Saudi Arabia prioritised border security and a unified Yemen under the internationally recognised government. At the same time, the UAE pursued influence in southern Yemen through the Southern Transitional Council (STC), alongside interests in strategic ports and counterterrorism (Almuslimi, 2026). The resulting rivalry culminated in Saudi intervention against the UAE-backed STC in December 2025, after which Riyadh-backed forces retook territory and the STC dissolved in January 2026 (Cafiero, 2026).

The conflict with Iran further highlighted these differing priorities. During the recent war, the UAE adopted a more assertive military posture, coordinating with the US and Israel against Iranian strategic and energy targets after attacks on UAE infrastructure. Saudi Arabia instead favoured diplomacy and criticised actions that risked further escalation and energy-market instability. Abu Dhabi subsequently deepened ties with Israel, while Qatar pursued mediation between Tehran and Washington, contributing to the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) (Said & Peled, 2026; England & Jilani, 2026).

The Outliers: Qatar and Oman

Qatar and Oman stand apart from the more competitive approaches of other GCC members by pursuing a hedging strategy. Rather than aligning exclusively with one power, both maintain relationships with competing regional and global actors to preserve strategic autonomy and flexibility.

Qatar combines close security ties with the United States and Türkiye with engagement with Iran and other regional actors, allowing Doha to expand its diplomatic influence and act as a mediator (Smith, 2025). Oman similarly emphasises neutrality and dialogue, maintaining relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to reduce regional tensions and preserve its role as an intermediary (Sherwood, 2016).

Their approach contrasts with the more assertive strategies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, highlighting the broader challenge of GCC integration. While member states may cooperate, they continue to pursue distinct strategies to protect their national interests. For Qatar and Oman, hedging provides a means of navigating an increasingly fragmented Gulf security environment without committing to exclusive alignment.

The Role of External Powers in Gulf Security

The Gulf's security framework is heavily dependent on the major powers which possess regional strategic influence. Thus, regional security cooperation remains limited while external powers provide a security framework through bilateral relations.

The U.S. plays a leading role in Gulf security as the principal security guarantor. American military bases, deployments and advanced weapon sales help exercise influence over the Gulf countries. Hence, regional deterrence against external threats, particularly Iran, was achieved by Washington's efforts. As the U.S. presence in the region is critical to controlling energy flows and oil supply, it aims to contain adversaries' influence and safeguard key strategic interests. This longstanding security umbrella has reduced GCC members' willingness to develop an integrated collective defence framework.

China expanded its economic sphere of influence significantly through energy trade, infrastructure investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Though China has not made any military commitments comparable to those of the U.S., economic cooperation has been a primary tool for inter-state interaction.

In comparison, Russia continuously pursued a balancing strategy while maintaining diplomatic and economic ties. While Iran stands out as a historical ally, Gulf countries represent crucial economic opportunities for bilateral trade. Moscow, after the fall of Assad and the U.S.-Iran conflict, transformed its commitment into less of a security guarantor and assumed diplomatic relations without military ties. Especially when Syrian political turmoil put Russia and Turkey on opposite tides, however, this change in Moscow's security commitment was observed after the regime fell in Syria, consequently leaving Turkey advantageous. Turkey became increasingly influential after expanding its military footprint in Qatar by setting a permanent military base.

These diverse external links shape GCC members' internal relationships, grant strategic flexibility, and simultaneously weaken incentives for deeper regional integration. The GCC member nations continue to opt for bilateral agreements that better reflect their unique security concerns and foreign policy goals rather than ceding sovereignty to a centralised military framework.

Three Paths Forward

The GCC faces three possible paths toward a stronger regional security framework: deeper military integration, an informal security architecture, or continued stagnation.

Due to Iran's growing ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities, as well as frequent Houthi attacks on Gulf energy infrastructure and civilian targets, missile and drone threats have emerged as the GCC's most pressing shared security problem.

Even though the GCC states have made significant investments in cutting-edge air defence systems, such as the Patriot and THAAD batteries supplied by the United States, these capabilities are still operated domestically rather than regionally. The GCC lacks a single command structure, interoperable radar networks, and standard operating procedures, in con-

trast to NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), which permits centralised command, shared early-warning systems, and coordinated responses across allies.

The first path, deeper integration, would involve strengthening collective-defence commitments, developing an integrated command structure, and improving military interoperability. While this could enhance the GCC's ability to respond to shared threats, differing threat perceptions, national interests, and competing security partnerships make a NATO-style alliance unlikely in the near term.

The second, and more plausible, path is an informal security architecture based on flexible coalitions and overlapping partnerships. Rather than replicating NATO's centralised model, the GCC could improve intelligence sharing, joint exercises, maritime security, missile defence, and crisis coordination while allowing members to maintain independent relationships with external powers. This approach would preserve national autonomy while enabling cooperation when interests converge.

The third path is stalled ambition, in which the GCC remains primarily a forum for consultation while member states continue to rely on separate bilateral security arrangements. Persistent rivalries and conflicting approaches to regional conflicts could leave collective responses fragmented and inconsistent.

Of these paths, an informal security architecture appears most realistic. The GCC's members have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate when their interests align, but remain reluctant to subordinate national priorities to a centralised defence system. The future of Gulf security is therefore more likely to depend on flexible networks of cooperation than on the creation of a formal "Gulf NATO."

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