



## Russia, Iran, China aim to reboot Persian Gulf security

### Description

Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran seek to establish collective security in the Persian Gulf, run by littoral states and not western militaries. This will fundamentally shift the region out of the Atlanticist paradigm.

The recent normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of a larger paradigm shift in West Asia. Russia, Iran, and China (RIC) are all playing key roles in shaping this change, which could make Anglo-American interventions in the region obsolete.

Although Russia, Iran, and China are often viewed as enemies, rivals, or competitors by the west, they have emerged as the main powerbrokers designing exit strategies from many of the western-sponsored crises in West Asia.

While Russia and Iran have played more decisive military and security roles in this development, China has weighed in with its economic heft to bring to the fore this regional paradigm shift.

Much of this change will be directed at the littoral states of the Persian Gulf, which the west has viewed as its exclusive zone of influence since early last century – for both its strategic waterway routes and its oil and gas wealth. But in just the past few years, those dynamics have shifted dramatically.

### ‘Divide and conquer’

Today, Russia, Iran, and China share similar security concerns about western-manipulated conflicts and divisions in their regions. The RIC geography consists of relatively large territories with very diverse ethnic compositions. This diversity has been frequently weaponized by the west – in the form of separatist groups – to destabilize the central governments.

Examples are rife: Russia faced a Chechen insurrection which ended with a decisive victory over the separatist elements, but at a high price. In China, the Muslim card was used to destabilize the western regions through support for Uyghur separatist groups that launched numerous terrorist attacks on mainland China.

Similarly, Iran's mosaic of Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Lur, Arab, and Baloch ethnic groups has been a clear target for the use of separatism as a tool to destabilize the central government.

In the 1980s, Former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated for "The Arc of Crisis" to fracture most of the countries on the border with China and the Soviet Union by supporting religious and ethnic separatist groups.

In addition to security concerns related to separatist groups, there are also economic security concerns, such as the control of sensitive maritime route choke points, including the Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab al-Mandab Straits. These critical waterways can be used to cut off energy supplies and trade between China and the Persian Gulf region. To address these threats, Russia, Iran, and China have been conducting regular navy exercises.

### **US control over the Persian Gulf**

There are currently over 60 western military bases or facilities – and around 50,000 US troops – stationed in West Asia. Washington claims this oversized military presence is required in order to provide "security and prosperity" for the region, yet recent history suggests they are primarily there to maintain western hegemony.

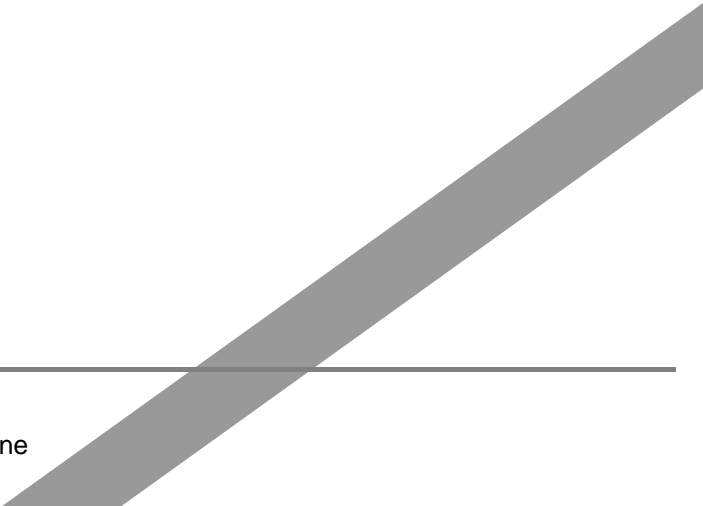
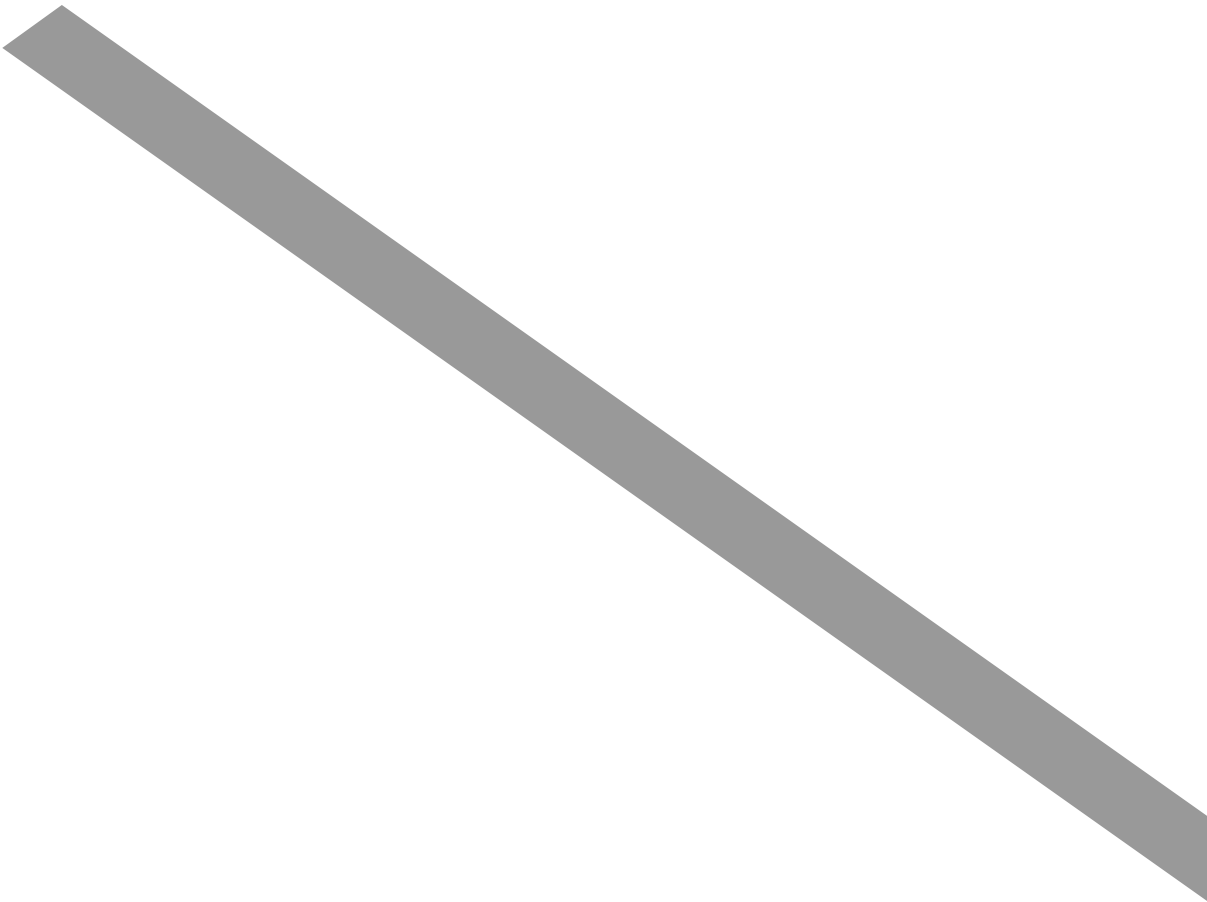
Map of US facilities in West Asia

## Map of US facilities in West Asia

The US has also provided 'maritime security' in the Persian Gulf for decades, and its NATO-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) have been present in West Asian waters since 1983, unilaterally policing shipments and even launching hostile actions against target states such as Iraq and Somalia.

The CMF alliance, it should be noted, claims responsibility for the security of four bodies of water in West Asia: the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.

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Map of the NATO-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) areas of operation in West Asian waterways

### **China enters the fray as an ‘honest broker’**

Chinese policy in West Asia – rooted in the Belt and Road Initiative ([BRI](#)) – began to take shape diplomatically in January 2016, when President Xi Jinping visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, three countries on different sides of the sectarian conflict that was sparked by the US’ 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq.

Xi’s visit took place as Saudi-Iranian relations hit rock bottom, with Riyadh’s provocative execution of Saudi Shia cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr just days before the Chinese president arrived in the region. The killing sparked protests in Iran, leading to the ransacking of Saudi Arabia’s Tehran embassy and the final break in diplomatic relations between the two key Persian Gulf states.

However, China’s friendly and increasingly close economic relationship with all three nations enabled it to become a trusted broker, coordinating separately with each to gradually strike comprehensive strategic agreements.

In April 2022, Xi launched the Global Security Initiative ([GSI](#)) based on the principles of the UN Charter, the very basis of international law, which has long been ignored by western powers. While Beijing has been conciliatory toward the west in this and other initiatives, a sharper tone emerged with the realization that engaging with the west to resolve West Asian crises – which are, in reality, a creation of Atlantacist policies – was a pointless endeavor.

The new Chinese position that “people in the Middle East [West Asia] are the masters of their own fate” and that “they are the ones who should take the lead in the region’s security affairs” was first pronounced by Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the second Middle East Security Forum held by the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing in September 2022.

This position was reiterated that December by President Xi in his speech at the China-Arab Summit in Riyadh, where the Chinese head of state was welcomed to great fanfare. Unlike the US and the EU, China employs even-handed diplomatic and economic policies toward all West Asian states, and is exceptionally well-positioned to act as an honest regional broker.

For China, which imports more than two-thirds of its crude oil needs from overseas, unfettered access to the energy-rich Persian Gulf represents a major security interest, and Xi’s trip made that crystal clear.

### **Moscow’s mediation**

Despite its staunch defense of Syria during the decade-long military conflict there, Moscow has managed to establish itself as a trusted mediator of conflicts in the Persian Gulf region and, like Beijing, recognizes the futility of relying on the west for regional peace and stability.

In July 2019, the Russians [presented](#) the “Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region” to the members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), followed by a more detailed proposal to representatives of Arab states, Iran, Turkey, the UNSC’s five permanent members, the EU, the Arab League, and the BRICS.

Predictably, the proposal did not receive full support from either western powers or their regional allies, who viewed the inclusion of Iran in the initiative as a deflection from their goal of isolating and weakening Tehran.

Despite this setback, Moscow has continued to actively pursue diplomacy in the region, including through its participation in the Astana process aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict.

### **Iranian initiatives**

During the administration of former US President Donald Trump, the US sought to create an anti-Iranian “[Arab NATO](#)” that included Israel and Arab Sunni states, while in parallel, Russia pushed for a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf.

Iran has toiled for many years to create a joint security architecture with its Persian Gulf neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia. Former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani successfully reached a 1997 security and cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia’s then Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, which remained effective until 2005.

However, US policies in the region since the 2003 invasion of Iraq created an unbridgeable sectarian gulf in the region, placing Saudi Arabia and Iran on different sides of a chasm that has been described as the ‘Shia Crescent’ versus the ‘Sunni Triangle.’ Despite the breakdown in diplomatic relations in 2016, Iran has continued to pursue and promote normalization and joint security initiatives.

In September 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani proposed the Hormuz Peace Endeavor ([HOPE](#)) at the UN General Assembly, which aimed to bring together the littoral states of the Persian Gulf – the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), plus Iran and Iraq – around a common framework for security, freedom of navigation, and economic cooperation. However, with the persistent US targeting of Iran, this initiative was not feasible.

It is crucial to note that the US assassination of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp’s (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani took place in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad on 3 January, 2020 while he was carrying a message from Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to the Iraqi Prime Minister, including a response to Saudi inquiries. At that time, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi was mediating communications between Tehran and Riyadh to reach understandings.

Iran’s current President, Ebrahim Raisi, has continued to support HOPE, achieving an important breakthrough when diplomatic relations with the UAE at the ambassadorial level were restored shortly after Raisi assumed his post in August 2021. Their diplomatic representation had been downgraded in the wake of the Saudi-Iranian diplomatic crisis in 2016.

### **Reasons for Saudi shift**

It is important to note that the Saudi-UAE foreign policy shift and their surprising divergence with the

policies of Washington have been simmering below the surface for several years, awaiting a catalyst.

The GCC countries have realized that the “Arab Spring” did nothing but create regional divisions and deplete vital national resources. Regional influencers prior to the seismic 2011 events – such as Qatar, Turkiye, Iran, Syria, the UAE, and Egypt – were sucked into dangerous adversarial positions with no upside.

While Riyadh and Abu Dhabi’s services and wealth were welcome in destabilizing Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iran, their own political and economic interests were not of paramount concern to Washington.

Although the Syrian crisis began to wind down, courtesy of Russian intervention and mediation, the Saudis and Emiratis became bogged down in an expensive quagmire in Yemen, now in its eighth year.

Further, the economic interests of Persian Gulf energy producers and Washington began to clearly diverge after the onset of the Ukraine war in February 2022, when OPEC+ states decided to curb production in order to maintain high oil prices against the wishes of the US and Europe.

In short, the US – which has long sought to reduce reliance on West Asian oil and has spent decades building up its domestic shale industry – has little energy synergy with Persian Gulf producers, whose interests increasingly intersect with Russia and China on the oil and gas front.

“Today, the US is no longer an energy partner for Saudi Arabia, but rather a competitor. In its stead, Beijing and Moscow have risen to become essential partners for Riyadh,” writes analyst Mohammad Salami.

### **West Asia without the west**

The various Russian, Iranian, and Chinese diplomatic and security initiatives finally ripened with the outbreak of the Ukraine war, when international relations began to fundamentally change shape, exposing the innate vulnerabilities of the western unipolar power constellation.

The US has lost the trust of its long-time allies in the region, its influence is waning fast, and the dollar – the global reserve currency – is now under attack. As West Asia and the rest of the world continues to face a range of complex challenges, including ongoing conflicts and economic instability, the emergence of new actors and peacemaking initiatives offer a quick and necessary path toward regional stability.

While it remains to be seen how the new Eurasian powers will shape the future of Persian Gulf security, several things are clear: Regional states are winding down their conflicts with new intermediaries; their collective and domestic focus is economy and development; reconciliation has become de rigeur for all; and none of these priorities require the astronomical military expenditures and western armed forces/bases that characterized Persian Gulf “security” of years past.

As the Persian Gulf littoral states begin to test their new friendships and incrementally build up trust in each other, it will be left to genuine, impartial mediators like Russia and China to bridge gaps in understandings and troubleshoot when incidents arise. These will take place at a table – not in a military arena – and be accompanied by trade deals that boost mutual wealth creation and development, rendering the old “guarantors” of Persian Gulf security entirely obsolete.

by Hussein Askary

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