



A Critical Evaluation of the GCC-EU Strategic Partnership

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Summary

- The EU-GCC Strategic Partnership is a little over three years old. While progress has been made in trade, energy cooperation, and political engagement, differences persist in terms of approaches to governance, regional stability and climate change policies.
- The ongoing wars in Gaza and in Ukraine highlight the need for enhanced collaboration between the EU and GCC.
- Europe faces an energy crisis and political instability, with concerns about potential U.S. withdrawal under a Trump presidency affecting NATO.
- The October 2025 GCC-EU Ministerial Summit elevated the partnership, resulting in a commitment to a 'Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.'
- The EU has acknowledged the diverse roles of GCC states in mediation, conflict resolution, and humanitarian aid, marking a needed shift in its pattern of engagement with the Gulf.
- Trump's America-First doctrine and tariffs pose a key threat to multilateralism and global trade.
- This Insight argues that while Europe aims for strategic autonomy, achieving this may be challenging and costly. A policy of strategic interdependence with key partners like the GCC is therefore recommended to foster collective security and prosperity.
- To achieve a higher level of cooperation between both blocs, the Insight puts forward the following recommendations:
 - » The EU should recognise that whereas GCC states may align on matters of collective security, they may diverge on other areas.
 - » The EU should refrain from implementing a uniform strategy when interacting with Gulf partners.
 - » The UAE should further capitalise on its role as a bridge between the EU and the Global South courtesy of its non-aligned stance.
 - » Both the GCC and the EU recognise the necessity for strategic interdependence, presenting an opportunity to forge a more resilient security cooperation to respond to the demands of a shifting global order.
 - » Both blocs should come up with measures to protect their critical industries against any possible economic setbacks that would occur as a result of Trump's tariffs.
 - » Incorporate more initiatives that promote mutual understanding through cultural exchange, joint educational programmes and people-to-people communication.
 - » Increase the frequency of Track II meetings involving experts and analysts from both blocs to address areas of mutual interest.



The Issue

The EU-GCC Strategic Partnership is now three years old. The highly-anticipated announcement was overshadowed by the realities of a shifting global order. In light of the conflict in Ukraine and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, both blocs encounter numerous obstacles that call for enhanced collaboration and coordination between them.

Confronted with an energy crisis and a shifting political landscape, Europe's circumstances are increasingly precarious due to the imminent risk of abandonment by America. In response, the EU has formulated a vision for a strategically autonomous bloc, capable of self-defence in anticipation of a potential American withdrawal.

The EU and GCC have similar concerns regarding the future of the United States as an ally and security guarantor. Now that Donald Trump is President, it is likely that he will forge ahead with his America First doctrine, which will likely limit the US' ability to provide security guarantees to its longstanding partners.

The first GCC-EU Ministerial Summit that took place in October 2024 has elevated the existing partnership to a new, much-needed level. Both blocs agreed on a 'Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity' to address regional and global issues that threaten mutual peace and prosperity.

The EU has formally acknowledged the different roles GCC states play in terms of mediation, conflict resolution and provision of humanitarian aid. This evolving approach signals a departure from earlier modes of engagement with the Gulf rooted in normative diplomacy.

Europe faces a precarious scenario currently as it strives to achieve strategic autonomy. The Insight argues that this goal may prove elusive given the cost of reforming Europe's defence policy and proposes pursuing a policy of strategic interdependence, one in which the EU could work hand-in-hand with its key partners, especially the GCC, to achieve collective peace and prosperity.

In a rapidly changing global landscape, it is essential to critically evaluate the existing commonalities and divergences between both blocs. Therefore, the necessity for enhanced cooperation and understanding of institutional disparities, diverse governance approaches, ideological currents, and their influence on relations between the two blocs is key.

Without such an understanding, reconciling any divides and establishing a more robust collaboration between the two blocs would be challenging.

Context and Background

The EU-GCC strategic partnership, announced on May 18, 2022, initiated a new phase in the relationship between the two blocs, demonstrating a consensus among EU member states on the importance of the Gulf region and the necessity for more EU engagement with Gulf countries.

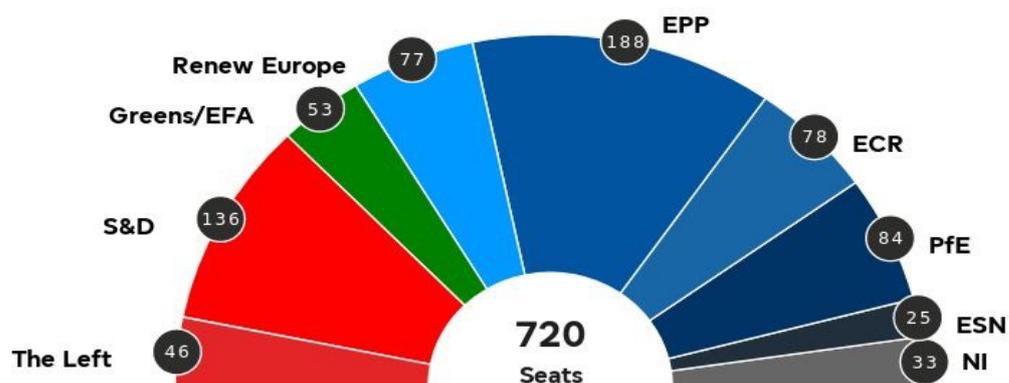
However, neither party has signed a Free-Trade Agreement (referred to as FTA herein) nor established a comprehensive framework for political engagement and collaboration in light of Europe's shift towards far-right populism. This shift was confirmed in the recent EU Parliamentary Elections in June 2024:

23/07/2024 - 11:07

All times are GMT+2

European Parliament 2024 - 2029

Constitutive session



Source: Provided by Verian for the European Parliament



The elections saw the Patriots for Europe (Pfe), a coalition of far-right and nationalist parties from 11 different member states, achieve significant political gains. With increased representation of far-right groups in the European Parliament, the tone of rhetoric will most certainly shift towards an increasingly nationalistic one.

As a result, the Pfe will most likely advocate for policies that safeguard 'European values,' which according to these parties, are inherently superior to other value systems. The normalisation and proliferation of the ideology of the far-right has led to a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments in recent years, leading many Muslim-majority countries and groups to reconsider relations with the West.

This will negatively impact diplomatic relations between the GCC and the EU, limit potential for deepening the strategic partnership and further exacerbate existing divides when it comes to religion and culture.

As members of both blocs increasingly disagree on issues related to global and regional security, commerce, and governance, the strategic partnership will encounter obstacles in the near future. While the agreement has achieved success in several aspects, it remains to be seen whether it will realise its intended potential in the coming years.



In 2022, considerable advancements have been observed in the relations between the EU and the GCC. In January 2022, former GCC Secretary-General Dr. Nayef Al-Hajraf visited Brussels, where he met with Josep Borrell, the former High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy of the EU. Subsequently, an EU-GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting occurred on the 23rd of February 2022 in Brussels, marking the first ministerial meeting of such kind in six years.¹

This ministerial meeting was a positive development, further enhancing GCC-EU relations was the European Commission's issuance of the joint communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf" on the 18th of May 2022. The document states that "the security and stability of the Gulf region has direct implications for the EU" and emphasises that "the European Union stands to benefit significantly from a more robust and strategic partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its member states."² The partnership promotes cooperation between the two blocs in several areas of mutual interests:

1. Trade and Investment

- Enhancing economic ties and diversifying bloc-to-bloc trade beyond oil and gas
- Promoting mutual investment opportunities and regulatory cooperation

2. Climate Change and Green Transition

- Joint efforts to address climate change
- Promoting renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable development

3. Energy Security

- Ensuring stable and secure energy supplies
- Collaborating on clean energy technologies and reducing carbon emissions

4. Global Health

- Strengthening cooperation on pandemic preparedness and response
- Supporting global health systems and vaccine distribution

5. Humanitarian and Development Cooperation

- Increased cooperation and coordination to tackle humanitarian crises
- Joint efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) in underdeveloped countries

6. Peace and Regional Stability

- Promoting dialogue and conflict resolution in the Middle East and beyond
- Enhancing cooperation on counter-terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation

7. People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges

- Expanding academic, scientific, and cultural cooperation
- Facilitating mobility and mutual understanding between societies

8. Institutional Cooperation

- Strengthening diplomatic ties and regular high-level dialogues
- Establishing structured forums for political and security discussions

Stalled Progress towards an FTA

Although varied levels of bilateral links have been established among members of the two blocs, progress towards free trade has either stalled or encountered implementation issues. Aside from the 1998 EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement, the two blocs have failed to achieve consensus on a free trade agreement, with negotiations having been placed on hold since 2008.³

The 2022 announcement regarding the strategic partnership reinvigorated discussions around this issue again, with officials on both sides calling for the need to reach a deal on an FTA soon.⁴

Despite the initiation of the EU-GCC Dialogue on Trade and Investment in 2017, no clear progress has been made on that front. Six dialogue sessions have taken place since 2017, with the most recent occurring in Brussels in May 2024. The most recent round of dialogues focused on investment, economic diversification efforts in the GCC and the need to cooperate further to address the challenge of climate change.

As Trump threatens Europe with tariffs, the latter risks falling behind in terms of international trade and global partnerships making it a matter of necessity to seek out new trade partnerships. That is why it is important for Europe to reach a deal with the GCC regarding the FTA. The world is evolving and the GCC is growing in terms of economic influence and strategic relevance.

The EU's economic rival, China has significantly outperformed the EU in swiftly establishing trade and investment connections as the non-oil economy in the GCC has grown.⁵ Nonetheless, the EU remains the second-largest trading partner of the GCC countries accounting for 12.3% of their total global trade in 2023. The total trade in goods between both blocs exceeded 187 billion Euros in 2023, an increase of 6.74% compared to the 175.2 billion Euros achieved in 2022. The year 2022 witnessed a significant increase of 54% in EU-GCC total trade in goods from 113.5 billion Euros in 2021. The GCC is currently the EU's sixth largest trading partner, while the EU ranks as the GCC's third largest trade partner. Bilateral trade flows reached record highs in 2024, with total trade exceeding 150 billion Euros.

European foreign direct investment (FDI) in the GCC amounted to 235.9 billion Euros by the end of 2023. The GCC has also invested heavily in the EU, through their sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), across a variety of sectors including considerable investments in real estate, sports and energy. In line with their growing aspirations and global influence, the GCC investment strategy, whether in the EU or globally, has shifted its focus towards investing in sectors that are strategically vital to the GCC's long-term goals. Indeed, Qatar has invested heavily in the automotive industry in Europe; Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) owns most of the shares in Lucid Motors which manufactures luxury electric vehicles; and the UAE's SWFs like Mubadala and ADIA have also made large investments in European aerospace and biotech sectors.

While trade may have been adversely affected by the disruption of global supply chains as a result of COVID, the post-pandemic period saw a recovery in terms of trade and political engagement. This has to be built upon as global politics and trade are entering a new phase characterised by instability and conflict. If recent diplomatic achievements are anything to go by, it is expected that trade between the two blocs will continue to grow.

As the recent engagements between the GCC and the EU have revolved around advancing peace and prosperity in their respective regions and beyond, it is only plausible to expect that there would be a push towards signing an FTA. However, the issue that remains is the extent to which GCC members diverge amongst themselves over a number of key issues. This has a direct impact on the negotiation process with the EU. For instance, the GCC states whose citizens are not yet exempt from Schengen Visa requirements will approach the negotiations differently to the UAE, a key GCC member, which had already secured visa exemptions for its citizens a decade ago.

In addition to that, the regional push towards economic diversification has yielded positive yet mixed results for the Gulf. For instance, the UAE has outperformed most of the GCC when it comes to economic diversification courtesy of its emphasis on promoting trade and connectivity, and digitalisation. This has led to a mismatch in terms of the economic priorities of the individual GCC states, which has slowed down the pace of regional economic integration.



The GCC aims to achieve economic integration, with the goal of establishing a customs union and common market. However, the path to deeper integration has faced some difficulties, owing to differences among member states on trade barriers and the pace of economic reforms.⁶

This explains why the UAE prefers to deal with the EU and EU member states bilaterally. Following two successful state visits to France and Italy, the UAE declared its intention to pursue the path of bilateral engagement with the EU to reach the deal on an FTA. The UAE's President HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni discussed the UAE's aim to enhance its presence in European markets with the help of Italy. They focused on negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), a bilateral free trade deal, with EU to achieve market liberalisation to further boost mutual trade.⁷

This was confirmed recently in an official announcement that the UAE and the EU have begun negotiations for a CEPA. During a phone call, UAE President HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen agreed to initiate negotiations for a CEPA. The announcement comes after HE Dr. Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Trade, and Valdis Dombrovskis, EU Commissioner for Trade, signed a Joint Statement of Intent, marking the official beginning of negotiations on the UAE-EU CEPA. There is a strong indication that an agreement will be reached, as both the UAE and the EU recognise the need for it given the looming threat of a global trade war. Furthermore, the agreement will drive investment and cooperation in key sectors such as renewable energy, green hydrogen and critical raw materials.⁸

Having said that, a bilateral agreement between the UAE and the EU is unlikely to impede the progress towards an FTA between the remaining GCC states and the EU.

Indeed, during the inaugural GCC-EU Ministerial meeting in October 2024, officials declared their interest in reviving FTA negotiations to strengthen economic ties between the two blocs. Despite their being a sufficient amount of political will to resume official negotiations this time around, there still are a few challenges that lie ahead.

The negotiations officially began in 1990 but encountered a few key obstacles due to disagreements over tariffs, political matters and market access for EU companies. At the time, GCC countries had reservations about exposing their domestic markets to foreign companies and ownership of business.

One of the key obstacles is the EU's insistence on the removal of export duties on energy products, which would enhance their access to GCC energy markets. Aside from wanting to access the GCC energy markets, EU firms have also demanded access to sectors such as telecommunications and the financial sector. GCC states have long opposed opening up their economies to foreign firms, including the EU's, to protect their domestic industries.

Indeed, GCC states prefer gradual economic liberalisation in line with their domestic visions and priorities. This includes empowering local businesses and entrepreneurs gradually to propel their diversification strategies forward.⁹ This is one of the main reasons the GCC is not keen to adopt EU-style economic liberalisation. The view from the Gulf is that this would benefit Europe more than it would benefit the Gulf.

The EU's insistence on incorporating "human rights clauses" into its trade agreements, continues to be met with opposition from the GCC as this is considered a breach of their sovereignty. However, as previously noted, the likelihood of a global trade war might prompt the EU to approach the negotiations differently this time around. Faced with the threat of a recession, the EU needs the GCC more than at any point in recent history. The GCC is growing in terms of outreach and stature, hence the pressure will be on the EU to deliver on the promises that were made in last October's summit.

Another key obstacle to traverse is the EU's recent introduction of economic, social and governance (ESG) linked trade mechanisms, which includes the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). The goal of these mechanisms is to ensure that trade adheres to environmental and ethical standards. While it is plausible to assume that those mechanisms will help the EU fulfil its environmental goals, they may be perceived as a form of trade protectionism. Key aluminium, steel and petrochemical

exporters in the GCC, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, could face financial penalties as the EU is rolling out a carbon tariff on carbon-intensive imports.

CBAM definitive regime (from 2026)



EU importers of goods covered by CBAM will register with national authorities where they can also buy **CBAM certificates**. The price of the certificates will be calculated depending on the **weekly average auction price of EU ETS allowances** expressed in €/tonne of CO₂ emitted.



EU importers will **declare the emissions** embedded in their imports and **surrender** the corresponding number of certificates each year.



If importers can prove that a **carbon price has already been paid** during the production of the imported goods, the corresponding amount **can be deducted**.

Source: European Commission, Tax and Customs Union¹⁰

Nevertheless, these regulatory obstacles can be overcome through negotiations with the EU, especially if the GCC can persuade the EU to acknowledge existing sustainability standards in the GCC. The UAE has emerged as a leader on this front in recent years. In 2021, Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA) began producing aluminium using solar power in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The use of solar energy to smelt aluminium will significantly reduce emissions associated with conventional smelting practices.¹¹

The UAE's Trade Minister, H.E. Dr Thani Al Zeyoudi, has stressed the importance of speed and pragmatism in negotiations, while remarking that deals with blocs take longer than bilateral deals, and stating the UAE's readiness to adapt to the situation.¹²

The UAE's advanced regulations, world-class logistical infrastructure, and openness to foreign capital appeal to foreign investors. Having cemented its position as a regional leader when it comes to ease of doing business and foreign capital protections, it is no surprise that FDI inflows into the UAE keeps increasing. In 2024, FDI inflows into the country surpassed 45 billion USD, a 48.7% increase from the previous year.¹³ Government-led initiatives such as allowing 100% foreign ownership of UAE-based companies and arbitration reform have made the UAE a safe choice for foreign firms seeking to enter the MENA market.

Moreover, the UAE's Green Agenda 2030 aligns closely with the EU's sustainability goals. Under the agenda, the UAE hopes to achieve long-term sustainable development and decrease the country's emissions.¹⁴ As part of its agenda, the UAE has made significant investments in renewable energy projects across Europe, specifically in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Germany.¹⁵

Challenges and Opportunities

The recent fallout between President Trump and President Zelenskyy of Ukraine has sparked fear across Europe. The US is now seen as having abandoned Ukraine in its war against Russia. Europeans fear that this will embolden Putin and pose a direct threat to European security, and have thus urged their leaders to reassess their current security framework to transition away from relying on US military support. There is a strong indication that the EU views the US not as a security guarantor but a destabilising force in the current global order.



The UK, which is no longer an EU member state, hosted a summit on Ukraine in London on the 2nd of March 2025 to support Ukraine and Zelenskyy following the fallout at the White House. The summit concluded with the formation of a “Coalition of the Willing” comprising European countries that have pledged to continue backing Ukraine. There were also talks of troops being deployed in Ukraine, but this remains to be seen given the budgetary constraints and varying national interests across Europe.

The recent realignment between the EU and the UK resulted in a number of diplomatic breakthroughs between them, culminating in the signing of new agreements on defence and trade at their first formal meeting since the UK left the EU. This includes a new defence pact which will enable the UK defence industry to access the EU-proposed Security Action for Europe (SAFE) defence fund worth 175 billion Euros.

One of the key challenges centres around cultural differences. France persists in protecting domestic ‘free speech’ amid broader Muslim apprehensions on blasphemy. In 2020, following a blasphemy incident in France, supermarkets in Kuwait and Qatar initiated a boycott of French products. The incident also incited an assault on the French Consulate in Jeddah. Europe is grappling with populist politics and the ascendance of the far right, exemplified by the National Rally’s recent successes, which may negatively impact the future of GCC-EU relations.¹⁶

This issue was reignited once again in 2023, following the Quran burning incident in Sweden. Muslims around the world were left outraged and deeply offended by the incident, reinforcing the belief among many that displays of Islamophobia are systemic and endorsed by Western states and societies. The result was increased polarisation between Europe and the Global South, Muslim communities, and their host countries in the West. This divide and symmetry in perception is deepening day after day, charged of a cultural and symbolic dimension.

The Muslim world believes that the EU and member states should treat this matter seriously. Inaction undermines Europe’s recent attempts to build a strategic partnership with Gulf countries, most of whom have been particularly vocal on this issue, and deepens global polarisation. The debate sparked by Qur’an burning is an opportunity for Europe to rethink its approach to the Global South—often perceived as morally patronising and strictly transactional.

On a positive note, the EU acknowledges the urgent need for a new and unified strategy to improve and guide the growing strategic alignment with the GCC on trade, investment, emerging technologies, energy security, climate change, green transition, interpersonal relations, regional and global security, humanitarian issues, and a new phase of dedicated institutional collaborations.¹⁷

The EU and GCC currently demonstrate considerable alignment about critical priority actions in Gaza and the pursuit of a conclusive two-state solution. There is a consensus between both blocs regarding the importance of preventing military escalation or a nuclear arms race in the region, advancing the peace process in Yemen, and safeguarding freedom of navigation.¹⁸

Trump 2.0: What lies next for Europe?

Trump has often threatened to withdraw from NATO, consistent with his objective to isolate the United States from international issues and avoid conflicts.

As the chief proponent of the America First approach, Trump may once again address the issue of American withdrawal from NATO. This time, however, Europe’s response may be more harsh and might deteriorate into a diplomatic crisis. Europe recognises its potential inability to manage the existing security environment if the US withdraws from NATO.

Despite these longstanding concerns, the recent NATO summit at the Hague yielded positive results for both the EU and NATO, and affirmed Trump’s commitment to supporting NATO despite his rhetorically antagonistic approach to the alliance in the past. This shift likely occurred when all 32 members of NATO (except Spain) agreed to increase their military spending to 5% of their GDPs by 2035.¹⁹ Trump has unsurprisingly endorsed the outcomes of the summit, reaffirming his country’s commitment to upholding Article 5 of the NATO treaty of 1949.²⁰

Still, Europe is still functioning with an increasing level of threat perception, due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Europe thinks a geopolitical spillover is probable as the war drags on. Trump had pledged to end the war in Ukraine in the run up to the US presidential elections; but it is uncertain whether he can formulate a peace agreement that aligns with the interests of America's longstanding European allies. Although Trump appears to have embraced a more amicable approach towards Putin than his predecessors, he did not hesitate to impose sanctions on Russia or provide military assistance to Ukraine when necessary.

In 2019, Trump became the first American president to provide military aid to Ukraine at \$1.5 billion, encompassing armaments and general military support. Nevertheless, with the American ammunition stockpile depleting, Trump will certainly be compelled to make certain concessions to Putin, since the war in Ukraine has evidently influenced the security assessments of both the US and Europe.

Considering Europe's persistent refusal to cede to Putin's demands, whatever concessions Trump may offer to Putin are likely to upset his European allies potentially jeopardise diplomatic relations between the US and Europe for the next four years at least.

Moving on to trade, Donald Trump's aggressive 'America First' trade agenda threatens both the GCC and Europe in varying ways. Should he impose new tariffs and trade barriers, EU and GCC exports to the US will in turn decline, raising the pressure on both blocs to negotiate an FTA.

The EU's steel and aluminium sector would be hit by new 25% import duties, putting at risk roughly \$3.1 billion in European metal exports to the U.S. Major economies like Germany and Italy, among the top ten U.S. steel suppliers, are especially exposed. In the event of U.S. tariffs on autos (a jump from 2.5% to 25%), Europe's vital automotive industry faces a sharp contraction – €56 billion in annual car exports to the U.S. (20% of EU auto exports) would become far less competitive.

The UAE, which is an important global player in the steel and aluminium business, will also be impacted by possible tariffs and cause diplomatic tension between the Trump's administration and one of its closest allies in the Middle East. The UAE exported 500,000 tonnes of steel and 300,000 tonnes of aluminium to the US last year alone. In terms of aluminium exports, the UAE is the fourth largest supplier of aluminium to the US. Therefore any tariffs that Trump may impose will significantly impact the UAE's market share in the American market especially as it aims to enhance its position as a global hub of trade and exports.

The UAE may be granted exemptions from aluminium tariffs by the US as was the case in Trump's first term, but the threat remains as Trump seems determined to push for a policy of protectionism.

The Importance of Track II Dialogues

Numerous Track II discussions occurred between the EU and the GCC in preparation for last October's summit. In contrast to earlier periods, and given the GCC's growing global stature, the nature of the discourse has evolved accordingly. As the link between the two blocs deepens strategically, it is plausible that the GCC's expectations will increase, and this may alter the future course of the partnership.

A key source of stress and potential difference is the EU's present position regarding the conflict in Gaza. Based on the author's participation in such meetings, it was apparent that the EU needs to address the issue of its declining public image in the Arab world. Many European states, officials, and citizens have vocally expressed the urgent necessity to put an end to bloodshed and human suffering. Indeed, several EU member nations have already recognised Palestine but the EU as a whole is seen as failing to exert pressure on Israel. The EU has maintained a consistent tone of rhetoric to the war in Gaza, criticising the devastating humanitarian impact caused by Israel's military operations. However, as things stand, there is a clear discrepancy between rhetoric and action.

The European move towards far-right ideologies and the rise in Islamophobic public sentiments will further affect the EU's public image in the Gulf region. A significant number of individuals in the Gulf regard Europe as a destination



for vacation, education, and medical tourism; hence, a rise in the occurrence of such instances may prompt Khaleejis to explore alternatives.

The EU's position on the recent war between Israel and Iran, which reaffirmed Israel's right to defend itself while urging de-escalation appeared ambiguous from a strategic standpoint. While the EU did not explicitly endorse Israel's pre-emptive airstrikes against Iran, it seemed unable to strike a balance between its perceived diplomatic neutrality and its alignment with the US and Israel.²¹

Nevertheless, given that the EU continues to favour a diplomatic approach vis-à-vis regional security, there is potential for deeper alignment between the GCC and the EU when it comes to conflict de-escalation approaches. Both track 1.5 and track 2 initiatives can play a fundamental role in bridging existing practical gaps and formulating a strategy rooted in alignment. For this to happen, the EU should invest time and effort in creating social networks between Khaleejis and their European counterparts.

Indeed, strong social networks are essential for establishing a robust foundation for increased and mutually enforcing relations between both blocs. There was an agreement among GCC participants in recent dialogues that the EU has to engage more constructively with the GCC. The EU needs to recalibrate its regional strategy to align more effectively with the specific expectations and objectives of the GCC. A good place to start would be to shift from projecting Eurocentric perspectives onto the GCC to recognising the varying needs and objectives of individual GCC member states. It is also vital to be mindful of the diverse and evolving nature of their societies.

This extends to the domain of human rights, where both parties have achieved significant progress in their discussions, however there is still room for further exchange of views and opinions in a constructive manner.

Capacity building is crucial for fostering sustained engagement, as is the rectification of existing power imbalances, particularly within the EU. Addressing these dynamics is essential for restoring confidence and ensuring that the strategic partnership can flourish without the detrimental effects of prescribing normative frameworks onto the GCC states.

Strategic Interdependence versus Strategic Autonomy

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, prioritised strategic autonomy as a fundamental principle of her mandate. Charles Michel, former President of the European Council, famously referred to strategic autonomy as "the primary objective for our generation." President Emmanuel Macron of France and other heads of state were significantly involved in its development.

The term itself began to enter the EU's lexicon in the early 2010s, becoming more prominent in 2013 to be specific.²²

In 2016, the European Council defined strategic autonomy as "the capacity to act independently when necessary and collaboratively with partners whenever feasible." However, officials and experts found themselves misled by the extensive scope of the concept, which extends beyond its original goal of improving European defence to include several domains such as trade, health, food, energy, supply networks, and essential minerals. It is worth noting that Europe's push towards strategic autonomy was the result of a chain of key events including Brexit, US policy shifts during Trump's first term, and the COVID pandemic.²³

While the rhetoric of strategic autonomy has been dominating the European policy discourse in recent years, it is becoming increasingly clear that it would take a long time for Europe to fulfil those objectives given the likelihood of institutional disparities emerging among EU member states. Indeed, strategic autonomy requires consensus more than simply investing more capital in collective defence. That is not to negate the importance of investing in collective defence, but without there being a political consensus among member states, such initiatives will continue to face implementation challenges.

This is where the EU needs to shift its current mindset that prioritises strategic autonomy to one that promotes strategic interdependence. At its core, strategic interdependence recognises the need for resilient partnerships that are both mutually enforcing and sustainable. When it comes to GCC-EU relations, achieving a high level of strategic interdependence is required to truly unlock the potential of the now three-year-old strategic partnership. While the existing strategic partnership provides a structured roadmap for mutual cooperation across a variety of areas, there is still plenty of room for improvement, starting with enhanced security cooperation between both blocs.

Drawing from the author's participation in bilateral forums, it's clear that GCC participants feel the EU does not fully acknowledge their security concerns and strategic priorities. While the EU views the GCC as a centre of stability and mediation in the region, its lack of a decisive role may impact the region negatively. From a GCC perspective, the EU needs to move beyond idealistic frameworks and instead focus on working with Gulf partners to address threats to regional security. This entails committing diplomatic, financial, and defence resources where they're most needed.²⁴

An agreement similar to the EU and Canada Security and Defence Agreement, signed on the 23rd of June 2025, could be negotiated between the GCC and the EU. The agreement establishes formal cooperation between the EU and Canada on security, crisis management and arms control.²⁵ A similar agreement with the Gulf supplements the strategic interdependence argument this Insight makes, as establishing a binding GCC-EU agreement would bolster collective security especially given the risks to trade routes and maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. With Europe being reliant on Gulf hydrocarbon exports, enhanced security cooperation with the GCC becomes a strategic necessity in that it would safeguard supply chains against any threats.

As previously mentioned, Trump's America-First doctrine has prompted Europeans to plan for a future in which the US will no longer cater for their security demands.

On the 4th of March 2025, Ursula von der Leyen presented a plan to bolster European defence and military power called "ReArm Europe". ReArm Europe will contribute 800 billion Euros towards the EU defence budget, marking the beginning of a new era for European defence and security.

However, as ambitious as the plan might seem, the cost might prove to be too high for the EU's economy, which in turn, might lead to austerity measures being taken across member states. Indeed, Belgium has recently voiced its concerns over the decision to increase defence spending, claiming that it would lead to budget cuts in the future.

Belgium's Budget Minister Vincent Van Peteghem has declared in a recent interview that; "Every euro that's a deficit today ... is a euro that will be debt, and that debt will be one day a tax or a cut and in the social welfare state." He noted that while defense is a priority, the sustainability of the welfare state should be guaranteed.²⁶

Recommendations

In a rapidly changing global landscape, it is essential to critically evaluate the existing commonalities and divergences between both blocs. Therefore, the necessity for enhanced cooperation and understanding of institutional gaps, diverse governance approaches, ideological currents, and their influence on relations between the two blocs is key. Without such an understanding, reconciling any divides and establishing a more robust collaboration between the two blocs would be challenging.

To achieve a higher level of cooperation between both blocs, the Insight puts forward the following recommendations:

- The EU should recognise that whereas GCC states may align on matters of collective security, they may diverge on other areas.
- The EU should refrain from implementing a uniform strategy when interacting with Gulf partners.
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- Both the GCC and the EU recognise the necessity for strategic interdependence, presenting an opportunity to forge a more resilient security cooperation to respond to the demands of a shifting global order.



- Both blocs should come up with measures to protect their critical industries against any possible economic setbacks that would occur as a result of Trump's tariffs.
- Incorporate more initiatives that promote mutual understanding through cultural exchange, joint educational programmes and people-to-people communication.
- Increase the frequency of Track II meetings involving experts and analysts from both blocs to address areas of mutual interest.

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