

Middle East Power Plays: The UAE's Role



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A NEW TURMOIL, ON NEW TERMS

The re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has initially produced significantly less political volatility compared to the months following his shock 2016 triumph. With a solid win in both the electoral college and popular vote, few of Trump's harshest critics have questioned his legitimacy, or sought to immediately undercut his mandate to govern.

This is true in both the domestic and foreign policy realms, where Trump's initial victory caused nothing short of chaos. Despite some controversial nominees for top national security posts—notably television presenter Peter Hegseth as Secretary of Defense, and former Democratic Congresswoman Rep.

Tulsi Gabbard as director of national intelligence—the foreign policy team being lined up for “Trump II” appears more grounded than that of the first Trump administration, being topped by the centrist Senator Marco Rubio of Florida as Secretary of State. There is little to suggest a reprise.

Michael Flynn as National Security Advisor, who left office after barely a month amid accusations he had lied to the new Vice President about his contacts with the Russian ambassador to Washington. Instead, much of the political discourse in the US in the aftermath of the election has centered on the dysfunction of the outgoing Biden administration, and the Democratic party that allowed Trump.



Yet the relative placid nature of the transition has masked profound uncertainty, and the potential for even great turmoil. Especially in the foreign policy arena, Trump is unlikely to enjoy any more of a “honeymoon” than he did the first time around, with crises across the globe, from the war in Ukraine to constitutional crises in France and Korea, and a potentially existential “Thucydides Trap” in the form of a rising and impatient People's Republic of China.

Most glaring of all is the radical degradation of the security situation in the Middle East. While there were moments of heightened tension in the region during Trump's first term, such as the US targeted killing of Iranian politico-military leader Qasem Soleimani, the period was largely defined by agreements like the United Arab Emirates–Israel Normalization Agreement, and other products of the Abraham Accords peace process. But a little more than a year after outgoing National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan described it as “quieter today than it has been in two decades,” the region is now suffering from virtually unprecedented turmoil, in which scarcely imaginable scenarios like direct hostilities between Iran and Israel, or a sudden conclusion to a decades-long civil war in Syria, have become instant inevitabilities.



Adding to the volatility of the situation are the increasingly broad and complex bi- and multilateral relations of individual states, and non-state actors in the region. This dynamic is epitomized by the United Arab Emirates. Itself a federal state, the UAE has since its independence a half-century ago enjoyed a diverse array of foreign ties, in recent notably with China and Russia, the two top peer

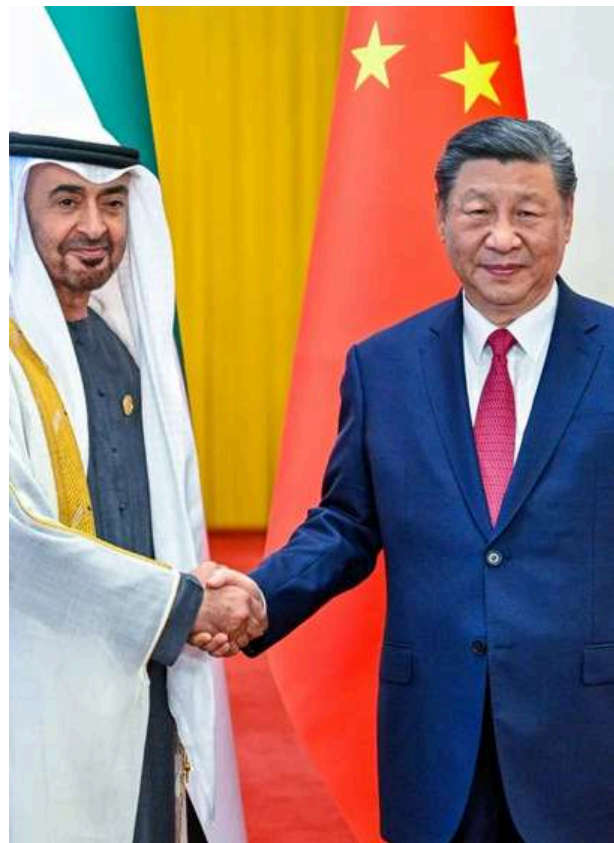
competitors of the US. Indeed, the UAE's ties with these two revisionist powers, as well as its role as a leading Gulf entrepôt, makes it the perfect test case for the ability of the US, the EU and others to effectively manage this new era of complex turmoil. The following three reports examine this exceptional situation, and the risks and challenges it represents.

THE UAE'S ROLE IN THE RUSSIA- CHINA AXIS

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a population of nearly 10 million, with only about 12 percent being native citizens. It aspires to be a global “melting pot,” welcoming people worldwide. The UAE is a federal, elective monarchy composed of seven emirates—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah— with Abu Dhabi serving as the capital. Before becoming independent, the UAE was a British protectorate, partially explaining its Western-oriented foreign policy.

The country boasts some of the world’s largest deep-water harbors, including the Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi and the Port of Jebel Ali. Among the Arab Gulf states, the UAE stands out for its stability, being free from religious extremism, and having resolved most border disputes with neighboring countries.

The UAE constitution grants the federation the primary authority over foreign policy matters (Articles 120-121), while the individual Emirates holds legislative power over other subjects (Articles 122-123). The UAE’s primary bodies responsible for foreign policy-making are the Federal Supreme Council (FSC), the Federal Council of Ministers, and the Federal National Council (FNC). Despite the federation’s institutional prerogatives, it is essential to emphasize that individual leaders and their personalities have significantly influenced the UAE’s foreign policy with their charisma and determination.



Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE, exemplified this influence. He was visionary and strategic, using the nation’s oil wealth to transform the country from a desert landscape to one of the world’s most advanced societies. By adopting liberal economic policies, he steered the UAE towards globalization and modern development. The UAE played a crucial role in establishing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), joined international organizations like the WTO, and integrated into other global systems to expand its markets in the oil and non-oil sectors. Sheikh Zayed aspired for the UAE to emerge as a regional power and understood that to achieve this, the country needed to be shielded from domestic instability and regional and external interventions.

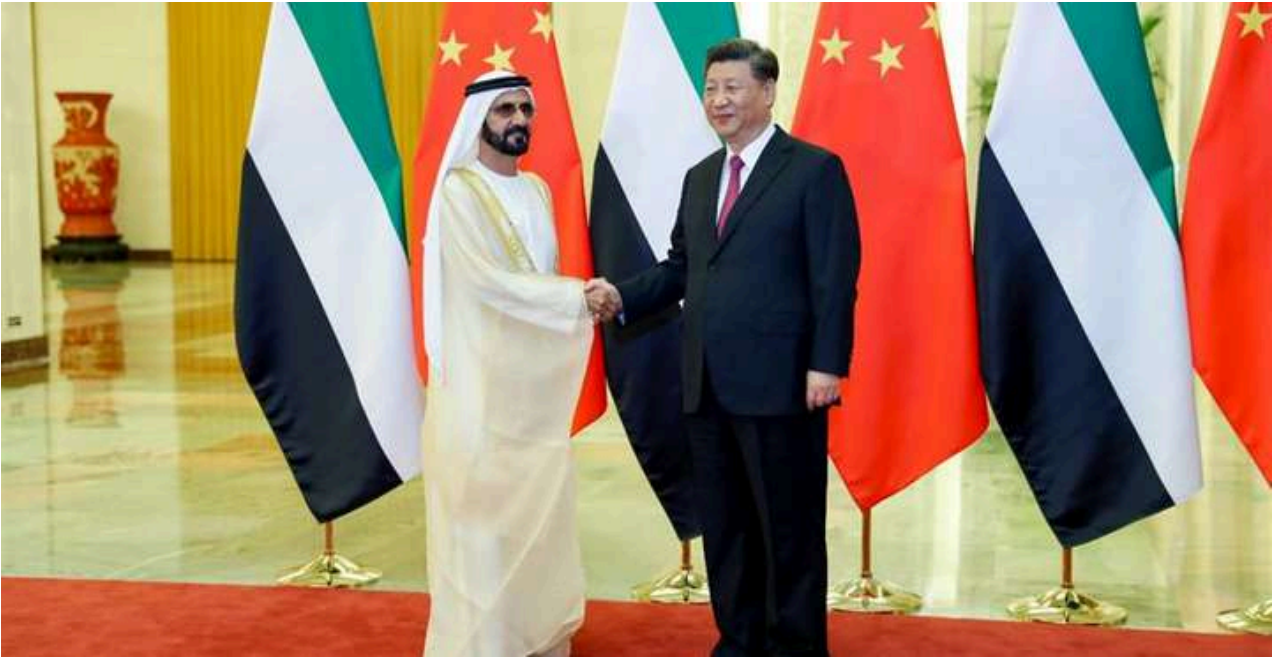
Mohammed bin Zayed's (MBZ) political capacity now allows him to influence Emirati decision-making enormously, with the UAE's current foreign policy reflecting his personality and ideology. He intends to make the UAE the central economic and financial hub connecting East and West in the Western Indian Ocean region. He aspires to change the Middle East's regional political order by blending Dubai's economic liberalism with Abu Dhabi's secular, authoritarian governance style. He adopts a *realpolitik* and pragmatic approach to international affairs and views

the military as a crucial tool for resolving political issues. He has overseen the establishment of the UAE's armed forces and aims to develop a robust indigenous defense sector. His ambition is to transform the UAE into a "middle power," a term used in international relations to describe a state that, while not a superpower or great power, holds moderate influence and global recognition through its economic, military, or diplomatic capabilities.



The Middle Power Context

Transition Council (STC), which governs much of the Aden region. Yemen holds strategic significance for the UAE, as control over its southern region is



Middle powers may not wield the same level of global dominance as superpowers, but they can substantially impact regional and global affairs. These countries frequently engage in international organizations and multilateral diplomacy, playing pivotal roles in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and advancing international norms and cooperation. By positioning themselves as mediators or bridge-builders, middle powers can use their relative neutrality or regional influence to facilitate dialogue between major powers and smaller states. These countries usually maintain a substantial military force, though not at the level of superpowers, focusing on defense and regional security rather than global power projection. In the volatile Gulf region, where numerous potential conflict zones exist, the UAE addresses these challenges by continuously upgrading its security and defense capabilities and investing in advanced weaponry to ensure its protection.

crucial for projecting power in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and East Africa.

The UAE maintains substantial political influence in both northern and southern Yemen. While the UAE has been involved in Libya, its actions have been relatively moderate. Despite scaling back its military presence in Yemen, Libya, and other conflict zones, the UAE remains dedicated to advancing its vision for a stable and tolerant Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

During the Arab Spring, the UAE's regional status increased due to its economic resources and fears about Islamist groups, and it expanded its influence beyond its immediate area. The UAE pursued an assertive foreign policy in Africa, playing an important role in brokering a peace agreement with Eritrea and Ethiopia 2018.

Today, the UAE is broadening its influence from its immediate surroundings to a more extended regional and global presence. Initially, it focused on building goodwill within the GCC and has since made significant strides among other Arab nations. The UAE has been proactive in advancing GCC integration, becoming the first member to allow citizens of GCC countries to own real estate and obtain licenses for economic activities in 2013. Having solidified its position among its immediate GCC neighbors, the UAE is now expanding its influence to other Arab countries. The UAE participated in a Saudi-led military coalition that intervened in Yemen in March 2015 to reinstate the Hadi administration in Sana'a. However, the UAE has also supported the secessionist Southern

The UAE has demonstrated a willingness to take bold steps in its foreign policy within and beyond its region. Throughout the 2010s, its foreign policy evolved significantly, marked by several daring and sometimes controversial actions, such as blockading Qatar, diverging from Saudi Arabia's Yemen strategy, signing the Abraham Accords, and not aligning with the US on the Ukraine conflict, highlighting its growing autonomy. The Abraham Accords, in particular, facilitated the exchange of ambassadors and cooperation in trade, telecommunications, and civil aviation. Additionally, by shifting its stance from its traditional support for the Palestinian cause, the UAE has embraced a new



framework that emphasizes the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and globally, founded on mutual understanding, coexistence, and respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom.

The UAE's regional maneuvering has strengthened its position to pursue an independent foreign policy and assert itself against the US. It diverged from the US stance on the Ukraine crisis, adopting a balanced approach to the conflict. Despite being a key US ally, the UAE abstained from the UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's intervention in Ukraine. The UAE also perceived the US's security demands to protect weapons from Chinese espionage as excessively burdensome and potentially threatening its national sovereignty.

Furthermore, the UAE's proactive role during the pandemic, particularly in repatriating migrant workers to their home countries, enhanced its regional and international prestige. The UAE has advanced its role on the global stage by becoming a member of the BRICS New Development Bank and securing a dialogue partnership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It has transitioned from seeking mediation from neighboring countries to actively mediating regional issues, particularly in the Horn of Africa. This includes Eritrea, Somaliland, Somalia, Sudan, and Djibouti engagement.

Global Dynamics

Given the evolving regional and global dynamics, the UAE concentrates on economic and strategic diversification. Recognizing the trend of "multi-vector partnerships," "multi-alignment," "multipolarity," and "multilateralism" in shaping the new world order, the UAE aims to avoid alignment with

any single dominant global power. Instead, it seeks to carve out its path as a distinctive and authentic international actor, balancing East and West and Global South and North. The UAE aspires to become a global pivot, committed to peace, stability, and economic prosperity while maintaining its sovereignty, identity, and prominent position in the world.

The UAE faces a complex geopolitical landscape, navigating relationships with major powers on both sides. On the one hand, it must manage interactions with the USA, France, Germany, the EU, and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, it needs to engage with Russia and China, balancing these varied and often conflicting interests.

The question arises whether, despite the UAE's economic strength and Mohammed bin Zayed's ambitions, the country can establish itself as a significant global actor and effectively navigate relationships with major powers like the US, Russia, China, and Europe. It's crucial to recognize that the UAE relies mainly on the US for its security, even as it seeks to broaden its strategic partnerships with Russia and China. The US and Europe remain dominant forces in military technology and artificial intelligence. Furthermore, the UAE has a longstanding relationship with the United Kingdom, a key player in its establishment and development.

On the other hand, Russia is facing increasing isolation from the Western world due to its military aggression against Ukraine. In response, Russia is actively seeking methods to circumvent Western sanctions and protect the assets of its oligarchs. The UAE is interested in this context, particularly in attracting Russian investment tourists and fostering cooperation in key sectors. Meanwhile,

ideological inclinations align more with the autocratic axis, as evidenced by its ideological and axiological set (viewed through the lenses of political rights and freedoms), numerous agreements with Russia and China, engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, and its membership in BRICS.

The BRICS Momentum

On January 1, 2024, BRICS admitted four new members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. The group decided to expand at the Johannesburg summit in August 2023, sparking debate about its growing international influence.



and EU Member States with the highest freedom ratings, except for Hungary (“Partly Free”) as an EU Member State, which has shown a decline in political freedom

with V. Orban’s government. These ratings can shape diplomatic interactions, influence policy decisions, and impact how countries are perceived globally, affecting the broader geopolitical landscape.

The UAE’s economic growth and global ambitions raise concerns about its commitment to liberal democratic values and its approach to China and Russia. The UAE is only interested in its economic growth, establishing itself as a “balancer” between the West and East and between North and Global South, seeking to benefit from all sides while ensuring stability and peace. But it should be noted that with this approach, as stressed in the CaspianReport, when you try to please everyone, you risk alienating all - which is not in favor of the global ambitions of the UAE’s leadership.

Taking all this into account, the UAE seems to be (more or less quietly) aligning itself with autocratic or illiberal regimes, such as Russia and China, rather than upholding the core liberal values of the current international order. The question is about preserving the status quo and whether the UAE can reconcile its authoritarian political system with more respect for political rights and civil liberties. Economic success alone cannot compensate for the lack of progress in fundamental human rights and freedoms. The UAE stands at a critical juncture where it must decide whether to embrace liberal democratic principles or continue down the path of autocracy.

A closer examination of the axiological matrix of BRICS reveals that three of the original five BRICS countries—Brazil, India, and South Africa—share values similar to those of the EU and the US, which are critical pillars of the current international liberal order. This alignment introduces additional complexity to the group’s shared values. Despite facing internal divergences, an underdeveloped financial system, and significant axiological heterogeneity, the fundamental issue remains the adherence to political freedoms, especially in countries like China and Russia.

Respect for and advancement of political freedoms reflect an awareness of the importance of human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law, and democracy as fundamental values of the civilized world and the international liberal order.

According to the Freedom House Report 2024, the BRICS comprises two countries classified as “Free” (Brazil and South Africa), seven countries classified as “Not Free” (China, Russia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE), and one country classified as “Partly Free” (India). In contrast, this Report ranks the USA



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The UAE is making notable strides in certain areas of rights, notably through societal changes such as improving access to public spaces for women, implementing paid parental leave for private-sector employees, and increasing female labor participation—groundbreaking and impressive developments for the MENA region. Additionally, reforms in visa regulations and

labor laws reflect these efforts. However, it's essential to recognize that these activities are strategically aligned with the UAE's objectives of expanding its economic benefits and projecting a more liberal image. This approach could be seen as a selective focus on rights that serve these specific goals rather than a comprehensive commitment to broader rights and liberties.

Perhaps the issue of political freedoms and rights will be actualized depending on the outcome of the US elections on November 5, 2024. Depending on whether Kamala Harris or Donald Trump wins, the UAE will adjust its positioning accordingly. If Trump wins, the UAE might lean more freely towards the axis of autocracy, potentially losing its role as a "balancer" and, in the long term, risk being overshadowed by dominant autocracies such as Russia and China. Additionally, Saudi Arabia, a close ally but a much larger and economically competitive autocratic power, could also influence the UAE's strategic positioning.

The Strive for Economic Strength

While not as economically powerful as great powers, middle powers typically have robust economies that enable them to engage meaningfully in international trade and development initiatives. Reflecting this ambition, the Government of Abu Dhabi launched the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, a strategic plan to transform and diversify the UAE's economy. The plan focuses on key areas, including empowering a sizeable private sector; fostering a sustainable, knowledge-based economy; establishing an optimal and transparent regulatory environment; maintaining strong and diverse international relationships; optimizing the Emirate's resources; enhancing education, healthcare, and infrastructure;



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approach aligns with the UAE’s broader strategy to diversify its economic sectors and international (strategic) partnerships. The UAE’s sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), such as Mubadala Investment Company and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), have been central to this endeavor.

Russia

For Russia, the UAE represents a strategically important trading hub at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, facilitating access to Middle Eastern markets. The UAE’s geostrategic position has become increasingly valuable for Russia, especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and subsequent Western sanctions.

The primary drivers of UAE investments in Russia include pursuing a diversified economic portfolio, a fundamental principle established by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and continued by Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ). This

Mubadala Investment Company has engaged in Russia through a co-investment program with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF). It has taken a substantial stake in several Russian energy companies, including a notable investment in Gazprom Neft. Another significant commitment by Mubadala

is its involvement in the Arctic LNG 2 project, which bolsters Russia’s LNG production and export capabilities. Additionally, Mubadala has focused on technological advancements by investing in the Skolkovo Innovation Center, renowned for its tech incubators and research facilities, particularly in artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Launched at the World Government Summit in 2018, the Mohammed bin Rashid (MBR) Space Settlement Challenge aimed to advance space research, bolster the UAE's vision of establishing a robust national space agency, and foster a thriving domestic space industry. The Challenge also sought to position the UAE as a leading scientific research and talent center. The UAE and Russia have strengthened their collaboration through inter-governmental agreements focusing on space missions and satellite technologies. These agreements leverage Russia's extensive experience in space research alongside the UAE's ambitious space program.

In addition, DP World, a leading UAE-based global port operator, has entered into a joint venture with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to develop port terminals and logistics infrastructure in key Russian locations, including the Baltic and

Simultaneously, Russian businesses have significantly expanded their presence in the UAE, capitalizing on its global trade and financial hub status. The tourism sector has experienced

Far Eastern regions. These areas are vital for connecting Russia to global market routes. In 2023, DP World expanded its partnership with Russia by signing an agreement with Rosatom, the state-owned nuclear energy corporation, to develop the Northern Sea Route.



This collaboration extends to defense, counter-terrorism efforts, and the regulation of global oil markets. The expansion of these forums strengthens UAE-Russia ties and underscores their shared interest in advancing economic and political collaborations beyond the Western-dominated framework.

China

Despite Washington's concerns, the UAE has strengthened its relationship with China. In 2021, the US warned the UAE that a Chinese military presence could endanger their bilateral relations, notably regarding the construction of a military facility at Khalifa Port. The UAE responded by shutting down the facility but remains committed to expanding its economic ties with China.

During the pandemic, China-based Sinopharm conducted vaccine trials in the UAE. China has also invested in UAE agriculture; in 2012, a Chinese farm owner established irrigation systems, installed fences, and built air-conditioned greenhouses in the Nazwa desert. In July 2022,

Mohammed bin Zayed awarded the Order of Zayed, the UAE's highest civil decoration, to President Xi Jinping.

During Sheikh MBZ's state visit to China, the UAE and China signed 19 agreements and memorandums of understanding across critical sectors, including tourism, industry, technology, media, and the Belt and Road Initiative. These agreements highlight the deepening ties and mutual dedication to expanding collaborative efforts in strategic areas. The state visit by the UAE President marks a significant step forward in strengthening UAE-China relations and opens new avenues for enhancing bilateral cooperation.

Economic cooperation between the UAE and China transcends traditional trade and investment; it is about building a resilient and interconnected future. This includes partnerships in clean energy and innovative low-carbon technologies, reinforcing their commitment to a sustainable future.

The strong trade partnership between China and the UAE illustrates the deepening bilateral relations between the two nations. In 2023, China's investment in the UAE surged by 16.48 percent year-on-year, representing about 60 percent of China's total investment in Arab countries, according to media reports. Significant projects bolster this thriving trade relationship, including expanding Khalifa Port and developing free zones like the China-UAE Industrial Capacity Cooperation Demonstration Zone.

Zhang Tianze, Secretary General of the UAE-China Chamber of Commerce, highlighted that artificial intelligence (AI) collaborations could advance smart city technologies and autonomous transportation systems. Additionally, biotech partnerships could improve healthcare outcomes and enhance pharmaceutical development. Notably, emerging technologies and AI are the

sectors where China-Gulf cooperation could have the most significant impact—and potentially pose challenges for Western countries.

This growing China-Gulf energy interdependence is happening in the context of declining US hegemony and increasing global multipolarity, strengthening their ties. The UAE is acutely aware of these trends and is eager to position itself advantageously.

Chinese investments in the UAE are predominantly concentrated in trade, finance, insurance, and real estate sectors. The Belt and Road Exchange, established in Abu Dhabi in 2018, aims to become a significant international capital-raising platform, supporting Chinese businesses, foreign corporations, and international organizations in financing their investments, including those within the Silk Road Economic Belt network. To strengthen Abu Dhabi's ongoing partnerships with the Chinese government, the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) has established its first foreign representative office in Beijing. The UAE is strategically positioned to lead BRI nations in the Gulf and solidify its role as the region's commercial hub and gateway to Africa. Before joining the Belt and Road Initiative, China was already the UAE's second-largest economic partner.

During President Joe Biden's term, the United States sought to reassert its role as the leader of the free world, focusing on liberal values as cornerstones of its global leadership. In contrast, Thomas Juneau, a Middle East specialist at the University of Ottawa, noted that former President Donald Trump had effectively given the UAE a "green light" to pursue more aggressive actions. In contrast, Biden's administration has shown increased concern over human rights issues and the war in Yemen. The UAE's involvement in the Yemen conflict, partially driven by its relationship with Saudi Arabia, also served to support the US in its fight against al-Qaeda. For the UAE, maintaining influence in southern Yemen through the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is crucial to its regional approach.

Reflections

To understand the evolving dynamics in Europe and the European Union, it is crucial to view them through the lens of the shifting current liberal international order, which is undergoing gradual transformation. Europe and the USA remain a central pivot in this evolving framework.

The outcome of the upcoming US presidential election on November 5 is pivotal for determining the future trajectory of global affairs. If the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, prevails, it could signal a significant shift in US global strategy, veering away from the liberal international order as we know it. His campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," suggests a move towards a more sovereign and less internationalist approach, which could fundamentally alter the US engagement in global affairs.

Given the EU's global perspective, the emerging international context is becoming increasingly complex and heterogeneous, with various proactive actors such as the USA, BRICS, Russia, China, and the UAE shaping the global landscape. This evolving scenario is likely to be less liberal compared to the current one. Moving forward, one of the EU's main challenges will be to pivot towards a more coherent approach to solidify its role as a proactive defender of liberal democratic values.

Europe and North America remain the dominant sources of foreign investment in the region and remain the primary destinations for Gulf investments abroad. Europe's foreign direct investment in Saudi Arabia vastly exceeds that of China. In high-tech sectors, Gulf tech companies are still inclined to partner with Western firms. For instance, in 2023, the UAE's leading AI company, G42, chose to strengthen

ties with top US tech companies over China when faced with that choice. Similarly, in May 2024, the head of the \$100 billion Saudi investment firm Alat, specializing in AI and semiconductors, indicated that the fund would divest from China if pressured by the U.S. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulf states' sovereign wealth funds also heavily invested in American and European companies, highlighting the ongoing preference for the dollar and Western economies as safe havens in times of crisis.

Also, the UAE has a more robust cultural and political affinity with the US and Europe than Russia or China. English is the primary language in the Gulf, and Western films and cultural productions are prevalent. Gulf students studying abroad predominantly choose universities in the US or Europe.

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the EU's ineffective engagement with North African and other MENA countries has

opened the door for other global powers to increase their influence. These powers provide alternative partnerships, diminishing the reliance on traditional European allies. The EU's hesitance to enhance its political involvement has allowed nations like Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE to expand their influence.

To counter this, the EU needs a strategic overhaul: developing a more coherent and autonomous policy in the region that is independent of US interests. Europeans must shift from solely addressing migration and counter-terrorism to actively fostering long-term regional stability by effectively utilizing their economic and political assets. Without this shift, the EU risks becoming irrelevant in the region, and it will have difficulties preventing and controlling all those problems that quickly come to Europe from the MENA region



FROM MOSCOW TO BEIJING VIA ABUDHABI: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY AND EUROPE

The evolving trilateral relationship between Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and China represents a significant realignment in global geopolitics. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the UAE has emerged as a critical economic, energy, and financial hub. Its historical openness to Western markets and partnerships has gradually given way to a more diversified foreign policy shaped by pragmatism and multialignment. This shift is exemplified by the UAE's increasing closeness to Russia and China, particularly in areas like energy cooperation, financial investments, and technological collaboration.

For the European Union (EU), this growing axis poses a complex set of challenges. As the EU continues to grapple with the implications of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, including the urgent need to secure alternative energy supplies, the deepening UAE-Russia relationship complicates European efforts to isolate Moscow. Simultaneously, China's strategic involvement in the UAE, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The UAE's pivotal role in these dynamics lies in its ambition to maintain autonomy in foreign policy while leveraging its economic clout to position itself as a global middle power. However,

this ambition intersects with key EU interests, creating friction points that demand careful navigation. The UAE's facilitation of financial flows from sanctioned Russian entities, its advanced role in cryptocurrencies, and its strategic partnerships with China in infrastructure and renewable energy development directly impact the EU's ability to secure economic stability and energy independence.

This paper explores these intersections, analyzing the risks posed by the Russia-UAE-China alignment to EU security and economic interests. It focuses on five critical areas: energy security, financial transparency, the geopolitical implications of the UAE's rivalry with Qatar, the UAE's role in facilitating cryptocurrency transactions, and China's expanding influence in the Gulf. By unpacking these issues, this analysis aims to provide actionable insights into how the EU can mitigate these risks while pursuing its strategic objectives in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Energy Security Risks

Energy security remains a cornerstone of the EU economic and geopolitical stability. The Russia-Ukraine war has highlighted the EU's vulnerabilities, exposing its heavy reliance on Russian energy supplies. In response, the EU has undertaken significant efforts to diversify its energy sources, focusing on expanding partnerships with key suppliers in the Gulf region. The UAE and Qatar, as major players in the liquefied natural gas (LNG) market, have emerged as critical contributors to this diversification strategy. In 2022, Qatar alone accounted for 15 % of the EU's LNG imports, with expectation to rise as Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas supplies.

While the EU has moved to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, the UAE has strengthened its energy collaboration with Russia. This alignment is evident in their joint participation in OPEC+, where both nations have played pivotal roles in coordinating oil production cuts to stabilize global prices. The UAE's involvement in Arctic LNG projects, alongside Russia's Gazprom and Novatek, further results in growing partnership. For the EU, such cooperation raises concerns about the UAE indirectly supporting Russian energy strategies that could undermine Western sanctions against Russia.

China's expanding footprint in the UAE's energy sector compounds these challenges. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested heavily in UAE infrastructure, including the strategic Khalifa Port and renewable energy projects like Masdar City.

Chinese financing and technology have enhanced the UAE's energy diversification, particularly in solar and nuclear energy, but this relationship also grants Beijing significant leverage over UAE energy policies.[1] Given China's strategic competition with the EU, such influence could align UAE energy strategies with Chinese geopolitical objectives, potentially conflicts with European interests.

[2] The UAE's dual alignment with Russia and China presents a multifaceted risk to EU energy security. The UAE's strategic participation in OPEC+ and its investments in Russian LNG projects highlight the potential for supply disruptions or price manipulations that could impact Europe. Additionally, China's control over key UAE infrastructure could influence energy flow dynamics, posing a strategic challenge for the EU as it seeks to secure stable and independent energy supplies.





sanctioned individuals or entities often find their way into European markets through intermediaries in the UAE, complicating the EU's efforts to enforce financial restrictions. China's deepening financial ties with the UAE add another layer of complexity. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has established numerous investment channels in the UAE, including partnerships in free zones and digital payment systems like UnionPay. These systems, while boosting the UAE's economic clout, also provide a platform for opaque financial transactions that may facilitate money laundering.[1]

The UAE's financial system has come under scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which placed the country on its grey list in 2022. This designation highlights deficiencies in anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism .

The proliferation of illicit financial flows from the UAE to the EU presents a multifaceted challenge to European financial systems. These activities undermine the effectiveness of sanctions against Russian oligarchs and businesses, allowing capital to bypass restrictions and re-enter European markets through intermediaries. This erodes the EU's ability to enforce its financial and geopolitical policies effectively. Furthermore, the integration of such illicit funds into the EU's banking systems can distort market operations, reduce investor confidence, and destabilize economic frameworks. Additionally, the EU's inability to curb these financial flows risks damaging its global reputation as a leader in promoting transparency and financial

integrity. Such reputational harm may weaken the EU's influence in international regulatory forums and its credibility in combating financial crime on a global scale.

Energy Security Risks

The UAE has established itself as a leader in the emerging field of cryptocurrencies, capitalizing on its innovation-friendly regulatory environment. By creating frameworks that attract global blockchain companies, the UAE has positioned itself at the forefront of the digital asset economy. However, while cryptocurrencies offer economic opportunities, they also present significant risks to global financial stability, particularly in the context of sanctions evasion and illicit transactions.[1]

The UAE's proactive approach to regulating digital assets has been exemplified by the establishment of the Dubai Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority (VARA). This agency oversees cryptocurrency exchanges, initial coin offerings (ICOs), and blockchain startups. Dubai and Abu Dhabi have become global hubs for cryptocurrency and blockchain innovation, drawing significant investments from Asia, Europe, and North America.

However, this open regulatory landscape has also made the UAE an attractive destination for actors seeking to exploit cryptocurrencies for illicit purposes. Russian entities, in particular, have reportedly used digital currencies to bypass Western sanctions and transfer funds globally.

Cryptocurrencies have emerged as a tool for obeying financial sanctions, enabling the movement of funds without relying on traditional banking systems. Russian businesses and

oligarchs have exploited this mechanism to evade EU-imposed restrictions. Reports indicate that some UAE-based cryptocurrency exchanges have been used to facilitate these transactions, highlighting gaps in enforcement and oversight

The UAE's prominence in the global cryptocurrency ecosystem aligns closely with the strategic interests of both China and Russia, amplifying the risks for the EU. For Russia, the UAE's open and innovation-driven approach to cryptocurrencies provides a critical lifeline amid Western sanctions. Russian oligarchs and businesses have increasingly turned to digital assets to circumvent financial restrictions, leveraging the decentralized nature of blockchain technologies and the UAE's permissive regulatory framework to obscure their transactions. This undermines EU sanctions enforcement, allowing sanctioned entities to sustain economic activities and retain global influence.

For China, the UAE represents a strategic partner in its broader efforts to expand financial and technological autonomy. China's focus on promoting digital currencies, particularly its central bank digital currency (CBDC), aligns with its goal to reduce reliance on the global financial system dominated by the US. The UAE, as an early adopter of digital assets, serves as a testing ground for financial innovations that could later be integrated into China's global strategies, including its Belt and Road Initiative.

The convergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the UAE's cryptocurrency landscape creates a dual threat to the EU. Russia's use of cryptocurrencies to evade sanctions and China's efforts to reshape global financial norms through digital innovation both significantly decrease the EU's geopolitical leverage.

Geopolitical Tensions Over Qatar

China's Expanding Influence via the UAE

The rivalry between Qatar and the UAE has long been a defining feature of Gulf politics, with the 2017 blockade serving as a notable flashpoint. While relations between the two nations have improved since the blockade's resolution in 2021, the underlying competition for regional influence persists. This rivalry becomes more complex when examined through the lens of China and Russia's strategic interests in the region, which intersect with the EU's energy security and geopolitical priorities.

Qatar is a cornerstone of the EU's energy security strategy, supplying approximately 15 % of the LNG imports.[1] In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Qatar's importance has grown as the EU seeks to diversify its energy sources away from Russian gas. The robust partnerships established between Qatar and EU nations, including long-term LNG contracts, reinforce the country's pivotal role in ensuring stable energy supplies to Europe. The UAE's alignment with Russia and China adds complexity to its rivalry with Qatar. Russia views the UAE as a critical partner in its efforts to maintain energy market influence amid Western sanctions. The two nations coordinate closely within the OPEC+ framework, which has significant implications for global energy prices and supply dynamics. This alignment indirectly challenges Qatar's energy strategy, as Russia and the UAE's joint strategy may impact the pricing and availability of LNG supplies critical to the EU

At the same time, China leverages its growing partnerships with both the UAE and Qatar to expand its influence in the Gulf. While China maintains strong LNG import agreements with Qatar, it also invests heavily in UAE infrastructure and energy projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. This engagement allows China to position itself as a mediator and economic partner, complicating the EU's efforts to maintain a cohesive energy strategy in the region.

Belt and Road Initiative BRI has created its presence in the CGG region, with the UAE emerging as a pivotal partner in China's vision of a more interconnected global economy. This partnership is not merely economic; it also aligns with China's geopolitical ambitions to challenge Western dominance, including the EU's influence. Russia shares interests with China in reducing Western hegemony further enhance the strategic importance of the UAE as a nexus for their mutual goals.

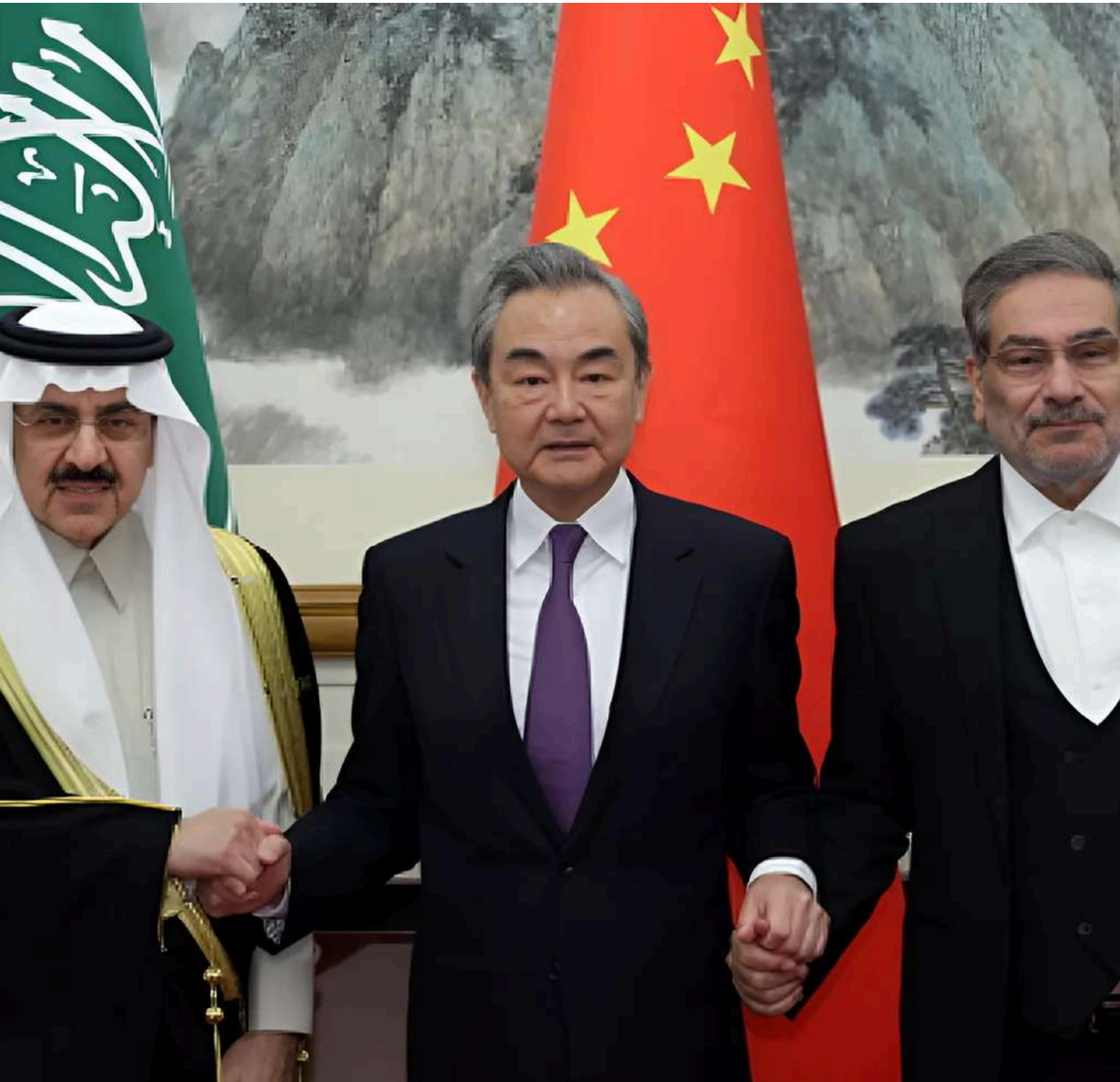
The UAE is a key focus in BRI, hosting significant infrastructure projects such as the expansion of Khalifa Port and the development of the China-UAE Industrial Capacity Cooperation Demonstration Zone. These investments bolster the UAE's position as a logistics hub connecting



Asia, Europe, and Africa. For China, these projects represent a broader strategy to secure vital trade routes and reduce its dependency on Western-dominated supply chains.

Additionally, China's partnership with the UAE extends to energy cooperation. Chinese firms have invested heavily in UAE renewable energy projects, including solar and nuclear initiatives, while also deepening their collaboration

in traditional energy sectors. This multifaceted engagement positions the UAE as a critical energy supplier and technological collaborator for China.[1] Russia's interests in the UAE align with China's ambitions, particularly in areas such as energy and logistics. Moscow views the UAE as a key partner in maintaining influence over global energy markets through its OPEC+ coordination.



investments in LNG projects. These collaborations allow Russia to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions while aligning with China to counterbalance European and American influence.[1]

EU's Strategic Responses and Challenges

Implications for the EU

The expanding influence of China and Russia in the UAE presents significant challenges for the EU, particularly in terms of trade, energy security, and geopolitical leverage.

Trade and Infrastructure: China's dominance in UAE infrastructure, particularly ports and free zones, provides Beijing with strategic control over key trade routes. This threatens the EU's access to Gulf markets and diminishes its influence in shaping regional trade norms.

Energy Security: The deepening Sino-UAE energy partnership poses a risk to the EU's long-term energy diversification efforts. China's growing stake in UAE renewable and traditional energy sectors could align UAE energy policies more closely with Beijing's geopolitical objectives, potentially at odds with EU priorities.

Technological Competition: China's deployment of advanced technologies in the UAE, such as Huawei's 5G networks, challenges the EU's position in the global tech race. The integration of Chinese tech in Gulf economies raises concerns over cybersecurity, data sovereignty, and strategic dependency.

Geopolitical Leverage: The combined interests of Russia and China in the UAE create a power bloc that undermines the EU's influence in the region. Their shared focus on countering Western dominance complicates Europe's ability to assert itself as a key player in Gulf affairs.

The EU faces mounting challenges in countering the growing influence of China and Russia in the Gulf, particularly through their alignment with the UAE. Both powers aim to reshape the global order by undermining Western dominance, and their strategic partnerships with the UAE serve as a critical platform for these ambitions. For the EU, these dynamics necessitate a proactive and multifaceted response to safeguard its economic, security, and geopolitical interests in the region.

China and Russia's influence over the UAE's energy policies poses direct risks to the EU's energy security. Russia's coordination with the UAE through OPEC+ enables Russia to manipulate global

oil prices, indirectly impacting European economies. At the same time, China's investments in UAE energy infrastructure and its growing footprint in renewable energy sectors align UAE policies more closely with Beijing's strategic goals. These factors complicate the EU's efforts to secure stable and diversified energy supplies.[1]

To address these vulnerabilities, the EU must:

- Expand LNG agreements with Qatar and other Gulf states to reduce dependency on UAE energy supplies influenced by China and Russia.
- Accelerate the transition to renewable energy within Europe to lessen reliance on external energy sources altogether.

The UAE's adoption of Chinese technologies, such as Huawei infrastructure, and its position as a hub for cryptocurrency innovation challenge the EU's economic and technological sovereignty. These developments not only erode the EU's competitive edge but also

expose European systems to cybersecurity risks and reduced influence in setting global tech standards

The EU should respond by:

- Promoting European tech partnerships in the Gulf to compete with Chinese offerings.
- Strengthening regulations around cybersecurity and data sovereignty to protect against potential vulnerabilities.

The UAE's financial systems, increasingly shaped by Russian capital flows and Chinese financial mechanisms, threaten the EU's efforts to enforce international sanctions and combat money laundering. Both Russia and China use the UAE's financial networks to bypass Western

regulations, undermining EU financial integrity and its global reputation as a leader in transparency.

The BRI projects and Russia's energy diplomacy in the UAE contribute to a broader strategy of countering Western influence in the Gulf. For the EU, this necessitates a recalibration of its approach to regional engagement, ensuring that its policies align with both its economic interests and its geopolitical goals, such as establishing deeper ties with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to push for balanced partnerships and counter external powers' influence; and leveraging the EU's expertise in green energy and technology to position itself as a valuable partner in Gulf economic diversification effort.

Conclusions

From the EU's perspective, the growing alignment between Russia, the UAE, and China represents a significant geopolitical and economic challenge. This trilateral relationship has introduced complex dynamics that directly impact the EU's strategic interests, particularly in energy security, financial transparency, and technological sovereignty. The UAE's role as a bridge between East and West, coupled with

its deepening ties to two autocratic powers, underscores the urgency for a coherent and proactive EU response.

The EU's reliance on Gulf energy supplies, particularly LNG, makes it vulnerable to disruptions influenced by Russia's partnership with the UAE and China's investments in UAE energy infrastructure. The manipulation of global oil and gas markets through OPEC+ decisions, often

coordinated by Russia and the UAE, further complicates the EU's energy diversification efforts. The EU must accelerate its transition to renewable energy and foster deeper collaborations with alternative suppliers, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to mitigate these vulnerabilities.

The UAE's financial systems, increasingly shaped by illicit capital from Russian oligarchs and Chinese financial networks, undermine the EU's ability to enforce sanctions and uphold international financial standards. Strengthening anti-money laundering (AML) frameworks and enhancing collaboration with UAE regulators are critical steps for safeguarding the EU's financial systems and maintaining global credibility.

China's dominance in technology, facilitated by its partnerships with the UAE, poses a significant risk to the EU's technological sovereignty and cybersecurity. The integration of Chinese technologies like 5G infrastructure in the Gulf highlights the urgency for the EU to promote its own technological solutions and strengthen regulatory protections.

The shared objectives of China and Russia to counterbalance Western influence, combined with their strategic ties to the UAE, challenge the EU's ability to assert itself as a key player in the Gulf. The EU must deepen its engagement with Gulf states, leveraging its expertise in green technology, trade, and diplomacy to counter external powers' influence.

US-UAE- CHINA- RUSSIA: THE NEW UNKNOWNNS

In 2002, in the runup to the American invasion of Iraq, then-US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously pontificated to a group of reporters about the different varieties of unknowns, especially the “unknown unknowns”—the things that he and other policymakers “don’t know we don’t know.” As it turned out, there was much the US didn’t know it didn’t know about Iraq, especially the cascade of interrelated problems that flowed from the sudden toppling of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime.

The US relationship with the United Arab Emirates poses no risks comparable to the calamitous, presidency-destroying war and long occupation that Rumsfeld’s remarks presaged. Yet the complexities of the situation harken back to the known and unknown unknowns of two decades

While the weighing of risks in US relationships in the Middle East traditionally focuses on the instability of Washington’s counterparties, the locus of potential instability can be seen as on the American side.

The Hegseth/Colby dynamic will likely be replicated across the new/old administration’s foreign and national security policy staff, from the State Department to special envoy to the Middle East Steven Witkoff (a Florida real estate investor and golfing buddy of the president) and “senior adviser on Arab and Middle Eastern affairs” Massad Boulos, a Lebanese-American billionaire dealmaker who is father-in-law to Trump’s younger daughter Tiffany. Meanwhile, Trump’s elder daughter’s husband Jared Kushner, who spearheaded the Abraham Accords during the first Trump Administration, is expected to spend the second tending to his own business interests, notably a private equity fund heavily financed from Gulf sources, including \$2 billion directed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and \$200 million each from Qatar and the UAE. How these and other members of the extended Trump “family” will impact administration posture towards the Gulf is a big unknown, and no doubt a worrying one to career staffers in the departments and agencies traditionally charged with developing and implementing such policies, and their counterparts in Abu Dhabi and other regional capitals.

The potential for private business interests or personal rivalries to overshadow policy may itself be less of a risk than simple inconstancy in policy. It is not just that a switch from a Peter Hegseth to a Elbridge Colby could lead to a starkly different focus on things like the suspected Chinese military facility at Khalifa port near Abu Dhabi. To the extent there is such a thing as a “Trump foreign policy,” it is one of improvisation and risk-taking, of extreme

strategic ambiguity and optionality, and simply of extremes. No presidency in the post-Cold War era was as rhetorically bellicose as “Trump 45.” But none was less willing to commit U.S. forces abroad—or more likely to make unexpected overtures to established foes, such as Russia, North Korea, and even China. And perhaps no president has had a support base more willing to tolerate or cheer on sudden reversals, even if they clash dramatically with previous policy, or loudly-declared “red lines.”

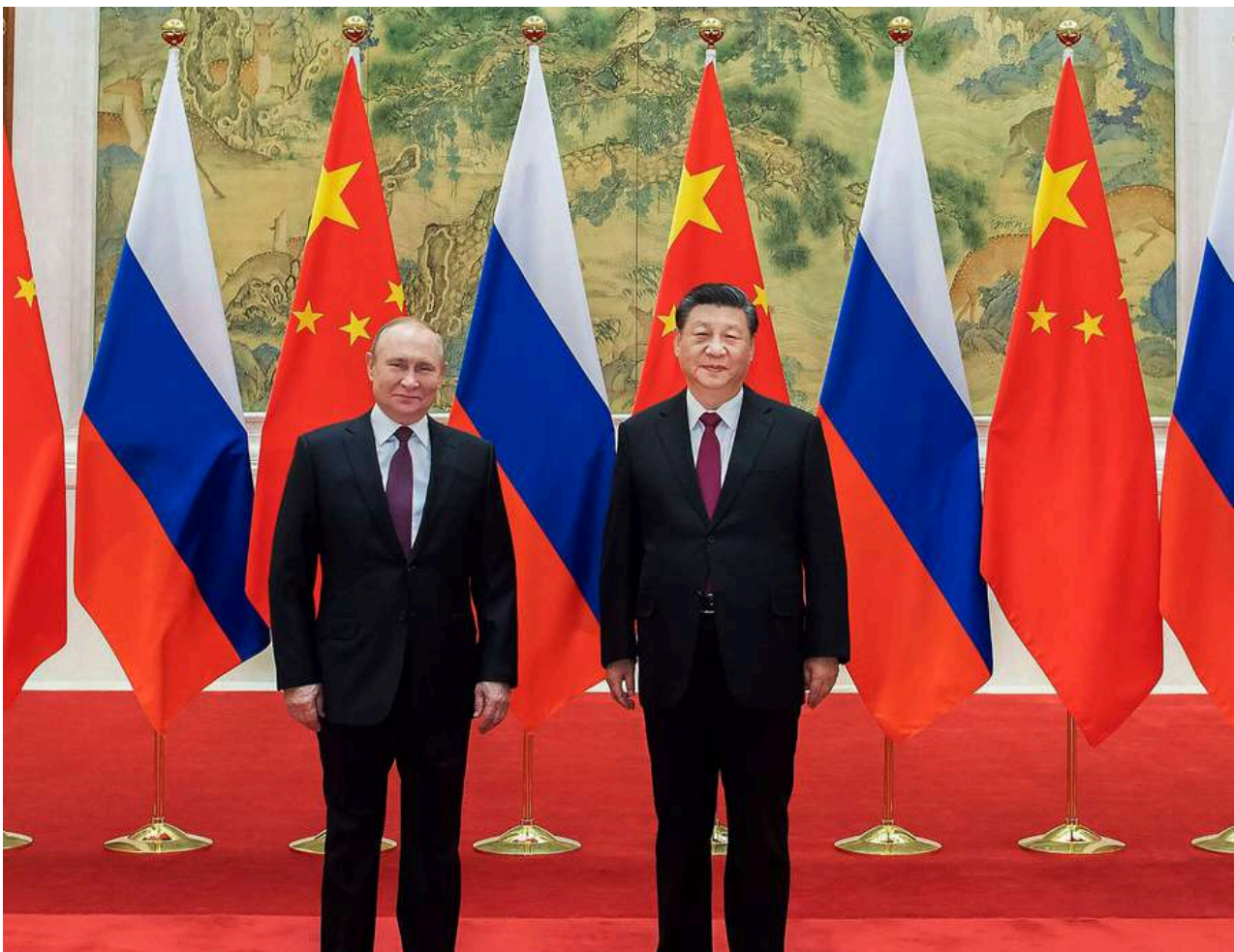
For certain national counterparties of the US this idiosyncratic approach to statecraft can offer both risks and rewards. For smaller players who have worked to nurture a stable relationship with Washington—such as the UAE—it may mostly involve risks.

One example of this risk is the potential for a sudden shift in the hostile posture towards Iran deeply embedded in Republican politics since the Obama Administration’s work to enact the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran “nuclear deal” in 2015—which the first Trump Administration withdrew from three years later. It is far from inconceivable that a new Trump Administration could seek to cement Trump’s “art of the deal” legacy with an opening to Tehran, and Iran would likely be open to such negotiations, Steven Simon and Adam Weinstein of the influential anti-interventionist Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft recently argued in a piece exploring the tug-of-war between Trump’s hawkish advisors and his own, more dovish impulses. If such a deal happened, it is largely inconceivable that Trump or his “hobbyist”-heavy Mideast braintrust would fully account for all the local intricacies and potential local fallout of such a deal.



Either way, for the UAE the fallout could be heavy. A sudden escalation of US-Iranian tension would impact the rebuilding of UAE-Iranian ties, which went into deep freeze along with the severing of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2016. This progress has been very slow and methodical, with Iran reappointing an ambassador to the UAE last year, and as-yet unconsummated dueling invitations for presidential visits. Perhaps more crucially, a new singling out of Tehran by Washington would impact the economic ties between Iran and the UAE, with a half-million Iranian expats living in Dubai, which long had the status of the Islamic Republic's "economic window to the world." This spring a UAE-Iran joint economic commission that had been dormant for a decade met in Abu Dhabi, as Iranian imports from the UAE topped \$20 billion, and the UAE becoming Iran's third-biggest export destination. What would happen if the new administration were to make containing Iran—or

"regime change"—a key priority, potentially to draw attention away from problems elsewhere or at home? Conversely, an attempt by Trump to enjoy a thaw with Iran could complicate life for the UAE. In the case of such a rapprochement would the US be likely to heed the concerns of its smaller regional allies? A key example here is the longstanding territorial dispute between Abu Dhabi and Tehran over Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa. Would Trump let the prospect of a glorious "Nixon in China" diplomatic breakthrough be complicated by a nagging territorial claim over a trio of small islands in the Gulf that Iran took control before the UAE's independence from Britain in 1971, based on sovereignty of a 19th-century ruler of Sharjah, one of the lesser-known of the seven emirates? Would he and his dilettante advisors, hawks or doves, even know about it? Chaos on the Gulf?



But for the US, the Gulf and the UAE also involve serious geopolitical risks.

To be certain, the Emirates has and still represents a solid partner for the US. “The Emiratis love the Americans,” one veteran US-based strategic consultant said after returning from a round of meetings with senior figures in the UAE in the weeks following the election. Cooperation between intelligence services is robust, and economic ties are strong, in part because of investments like that in presidential son-in-law Kushner’s private equity fund, and the presence of many alumni from leading US institutions like Goldman Sachs in public life. According to the strategic consultant, the people who run the country are “serious guys, who understand geopolitics.”

But, says this person, while the “UAE system” is “very US-driven,” there may be a lack of long-term strategy, and “big-game thinking.” Which is a reasonable source of concern for a country with increasingly far-flung political and economic ties, and ambitions.

What, for example, is the US to ultimately make of the UAE’s simultaneously deepening relations with Russia and China? With Russia having emerged as the “preferred foreign adversary” of the Democratic Party, and China occupying a similar position for the Republicans, it is a strategy that seems almost designed to leave the UAE at least halfway in disfavor with Washington.

In reality, the loose UAE-Russia-China “triad” is likely more of a reflection

of the Emirates’—and especially Dubai’s—longtime status as trading entrepôt, and the Emirates’ stated desire to diversify away from energy. This would naturally result in a push to cultivate relationships with as many diplomatic and commercial partners as possible.

In Russia’s case that means a large exporter of capital, perhaps \$100 billion of which has ended up in the UAE, and a sanctioned wartime economy desperately in need of whatever trading channels it can open or maintain. In a rare trip outside of Russia since the start of the Ukraine War, in December 2023 Russian President Vladimir Putin visited UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, calling the UAE “Russia’s main trading partner in the Arab world.” The UAE has also become a significant investor in Russia, with sovereign wealth fund Mubadala financing oil fields in Siberia and a major initiative to boost Russia’s production and exports of liquefied natural gas, a key market for the US energy industry as well. (Mubadala was also the first such fund in the region to pause its investments in Russia following the invasion of Ukraine.)

But for the US there are also big red flags in the form of arm sales, and transfers of sensitive technology. Over the past two decades the UAE—which hosts the region’s largest regular arms bazaar, the International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX)—has become one of Russia’s best customers for weapons. In the opening year of Trump’s first term the deals even included a letter of intent to join China as the only customer for Russia’s advanced Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jet. The UAE and Russia have also entered into joint weapons development agreements, including of a fifth-generation variant of the MiG-29. Likewise for civilian nuclear technology; state nuclear tech firm Rosatom has its regional HQ in Dubai, despite KEPCO of South Korea receiving the contract to build the Emirates’ four new commercial reactors.

While it is believed that the UAE knows it must walk a fine line with the Russians —“The Emirates will give them something

to keep them at bay but they won't overstep the line," is how the US-based strategic consultant put it—Moscow's ebbing influence in other corners of the region could lead it to dig deeper in the UAE. One such long-tail risk could see Russia making up for a loss of its naval base in Tartus, Syria with an attempt to seek alternate arrangements in the UAE. But it doesn't take such a far-fetched scenario to see the relationship as provocative to the US: In September of 2024 reports circulated of the UAE using mercenaries from the notorious Russian state-connected military services outfit formerly known as Wagner Group to supply arms to rebels in the ongoing war in Sudan, where Russia has its other main overseas naval facility.

The UAE's relations with China likely represent a more imminent and troubling risk for Washington. This is certainly the case with the naval facility at Khalifa, work on which restarted in 2023 after being paused in 2021 because of US concerns, according to leaked US intelligence reports later confirmed by UAE sources. Considered part of the so-called "project 141" network of overseas Chinese naval facilities, the Khalifa outpost could be seen by the new Trump administration as a dire provocation, especially in conjunction with Beijing's simultaneous moves to serve as a diplomatic interlocutor between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a humiliation for Washington that likely received significantly less media coverage than it deserved. And the UAE-China military relationship includes smaller, but for the US potentially even more jarring forms of cooperation. Among these was the purchase of Hongdu L-15A Falcon training jets from China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation, and a joint air force training exercises in summer of 2023 in China's northwest Xinjiang province, home to China's Uyghur Muslim community, whose ongoing persecution has been a cause célèbre for many Americans.

Meanwhile, elements of the US national security community and tech industry have expressed grave concerns over the China links of UAE artificial intelligence firm G42, a national champion

of the Emirates' stated goal to become an AI powerhouse by 2031. The firm, which is chaired by Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, who serves as both UAE national security advisor and chair of a new Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technology Council, has been accused of diverting US tech secrets to China. While the firm has agreed to constrain its China ties, details of the case have proved highly incendiary in Washington, including allegations that the UAE ambassador to the US intervened in an investigation of G42 by the United States House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, and the fact that the company's CEO, Peng Xiao, renounced his American citizenship in favor of a UAE passport.

While the UAE clearly has the desire to be seen as mitigating such irritants to the US, this is constrained by the reality of China's outsized economic heft in the country, being the UAE's largest trading partner, accounting for almost two-thirds of Chinese trade to the region, with the UAE being a major supplier of oil to China. There is simply no way the UAE's relationship with China will not complicate its relationship with the US—with serious tail risks that can't be discounted.

However, it is not at all certain that the new administration will subordinate its other regional objectives to a hawkish posture towards Beijing. "Predicting the incoming Trump administration's China policy—and China's likely response—is a guessing game," Rush Doshi, director of the Initiative on China Strategy at the Council

on Foreign Relations, wrote in late November.

So instead, it could be some other second-, third- or first-order effect that defines the US relationship with the UAE. Ranj Alaaldin, a fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, argued just after the election that it could lead to the UAE and other Gulf nations to develop their own collective security architecture “premised on the interests and stability of the Gulf states—and the wider region—as much as the interests of the United States.”.

Which, of course, could also be seen as a risk or threat by a Washington foreign policy establishment that has historically looked askance at allies that together attempt to move out from under the US security umbrella.

But this too is just speculation, since no one really knows what the “Disruptor-in-Chief” has in mind for the UAE and its other big-power relationships, among other potentially far-reaching known and unknown.

