



MODERN PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION AND THEIR SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS

STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE: THE ROLE OF THE GCC IN CENTRAL ASIA'S EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract:** *Relations between Central Asian states and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have expanded substantially since the early 1990s, evolving from limited post-Soviet economic ties into broad-based political, strategic, and energy partnerships. This article analyzes the drivers of GCC engagement in Central Asia, including diversification goals, geopolitical competition with Iran and Türkiye, and the region's growing significance amid global shifts following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It examines the institutionalization of cooperation through the emerging "GCC+C5" format, the rise of renewable-energy investments, and the GCC's efforts to cultivate influence amid the wider "new great game." The study argues that Central Asia has become a new arena for economic and diplomatic competition among Gulf states themselves, even as both regions seek to expand cooperation in trade, energy, infrastructure, and security. Despite competition among external powers, the GCC–Central Asia partnership is likely to deepen, driven by shared economic interests, cultural affinities, and parallel approaches to sovereignty and regime stability.*

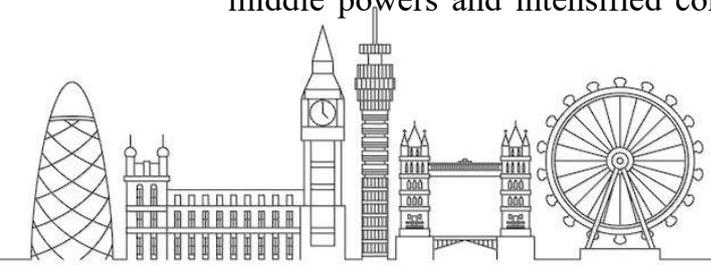
**Keywords:** *GCC, Central Asia, foreign policy, geopolitics, great-power competition, renewable energy, GCC+C5, economic diplomacy*

### Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened Central Asia to new geopolitical and economic partnerships, including with the states of the Arabian Peninsula. Although the early period of interaction between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the newly independent Central Asian republics focused primarily on trade, energy cooperation, and selective infrastructure investment, the relationship has since broadened into a dynamic and multilayered engagement. Historical affinities rooted in Islam, the revival of cultural linkages after decades of Soviet rule, and mutual interest in economic diversification have contributed to a gradual deepening of ties.

The strategic context evolved markedly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which altered regional power balances and encouraged Central Asian governments to expand their foreign-policy options beyond reliance on Moscow and Beijing. For the GCC states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—Central Asia represents both an economic opportunity and a geopolitical arena in which influence can be cultivated through investment, diplomacy, and elite-level engagement.

Against broader transformations in global politics, including the rise of southern middle powers and intensified competition over energy-transition technologies, Central





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Asia's strategic relevance has increased. Within this environment, the GCC has emerged as an increasingly proactive external actor, seeking to institutionalize cooperation through the new GCC+C5 framework and expand its renewable-energy footprint while navigating competition with Iran, Türkiye, Russia, China, and Western actors. This article examines the evolution of GCC foreign policies toward Central Asia, identifies the main drivers of engagement, and assesses the implications of expanding Gulf–Central Asia cooperation for regional and global politics.

### **Historical Foundations of GCC–Central Asia Relations**

Although modern ties date to the post-Soviet era, the relationship between Central Asia and the Arabian Gulf has deeper civilizational roots linked to Islam and historical cultural exchange. Under Soviet rule, Central Asia remained largely disconnected from the Middle East due to ideological restrictions and geopolitical barriers. With the dissolution of the USSR, these constraints disappeared, enabling the restoration of cultural linkages and opening the region to Gulf investment.

Early interactions centered on trade in textiles, agricultural products, and manufactured goods. By the mid-1990s, GCC investments—particularly from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—focused on energy and infrastructure. UAE-based entities such as Mubadala invested in Kazakhstan's energy-infrastructure projects, while Dubai-linked firms contributed to transport development and Turkmen oil extraction. Saudi Arabia offered financial support for sections of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, envisioned as a major conduit for Turkmen gas to South Asia.

These early initiatives laid the foundation for broader political and diplomatic engagement in the decades that followed.

### **The GCC in the “New Great Game”**

Central Asia quickly emerged as a site of geopolitical competition among major powers, including Russia, China, the United States, Türkiye, Iran, India, and the European Union. The region's value stems from its position at the intersection of trans-Eurasian connectivity routes and its rich energy resources.

Although the GCC entered the region later and with fewer historical ties than its competitors, Gulf engagement has become increasingly strategic. GCC states have gained foreign-policy autonomy over the past decade, enabling them to diversify partnerships and pursue independent geopolitical agendas. Their relationships with Russia and China—dominant actors in Central Asia—have also strengthened, creating opportunities for cooperation as well as strategic hedging.

Central Asian states retain membership in key multilateral structures, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). GCC interest in these institutions has grown: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait have joined the SCO as dialogue partners. Meanwhile, the GCC's close ties with Türkiye—an OTS founding member—provide another channel for engagement.





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**Institutionalization Through the GCC+C5 Format**

A major development in Gulf–Central Asia relations has been the emergence of the GCC+C5 format. In July 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted the first GCC–Central Asia Summit in Jeddah, representing a significant step toward formalizing collective engagement. The summit highlighted the GCC’s economic and political ambitions in the region, while Central Asian states expressed strong interest in diversifying their partnerships beyond Russia and China.

The summit followed a series of high-level meetings beginning in 2022 involving leaders from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Qatari emir’s 2023 visit to Kyrgyzstan was the first by an Arab leader to the country, symbolizing the expanding scope of diplomatic engagement.

While cooperation is economically driven, it is also shaped by geopolitical competition. The GCC aims to expand its presence relative to Iran—which enjoys geographical advantages in access to Central Asia—and Türkiye, which leverages shared Turkic identity to deepen regional influence.

**Energy and Renewables as Strategic Anchors**

Energy remains the backbone of GCC–Central Asia cooperation, with renewable-energy investments emerging as key strategic instruments. Saudi Arabia’s ACWA Power has committed more than USD 13 billion to renewable-energy projects in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The United Arab Emirates’ Masdar has become a leading investor in Uzbekistan’s solar and wind sectors, contributing nearly one gigawatt of generation capacity. Additionally, Masdar and W Solar are exploring hydropower development in Tajikistan.

These initiatives support Central Asia’s energy-transition goals—particularly Uzbekistan’s target of generating 7 gigawatts of solar electricity annually—and advance the GCC’s ambition to globalize its renewable-energy industries.

**Competition and Cooperation in a Multipolar Context**

GCC–Central Asia engagement unfolds within a multipolar environment shaped by shifting alliances. Türkiye’s recent rapprochement with Gulf states, China’s deepening economic presence in Saudi Arabia, and Russia’s diminished influence due to the war in Ukraine have created a complex landscape of simultaneous cooperation and competition.

Central Asia has increasingly become an arena for Gulf states to compete not only with external powers but also with each other. Capital-rich Gulf monarchies leverage investment, development aid, and energy partnerships to expand political influence. Despite this competition, Central Asian governments maintain multi-vector foreign policies, avoiding dependency on any single partner.

Areas of growing cooperation include energy security, transport connectivity, digital infrastructure, and counterterrorism.

**Conclusion**





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GCC–Central Asia relations have evolved into a multifaceted partnership grounded in shared economic interests, growing diplomatic engagement, and cultural affinities. Both regions are governed by resource-rich, stability-oriented regimes seeking reliable partners in an increasingly fragmented global order. The institutionalization of cooperation through the GCC+C5 format, combined with expanding engagement in renewables, infrastructure, and strategic connectivity, suggests that bilateral relations will continue to deepen.

Despite competitive pressures from Iran, Türkiye, China, and intra-GCC dynamics, the trajectory of Gulf–Central Asia relations points toward sustained and pragmatic expansion. This emerging partnership represents a significant example of South–South cooperation driven by complementary interests, geopolitical pragmatism, and shared visions for development and stability.

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