



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
Knowledge for All

## **15<sup>th</sup> Gulf Research Meeting**

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### **Workshop No. 5**

## **Great Power Competition in the Asia-Pacific: Challenges for Gulf Economic and Political Interests**

### **1. Directors**

#### **Degang Sun**

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### **2. Abstract**

The Asia-Pacific region (including East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia, and Oceania) is one of the most culturally diverse and economically vibrant regions in the world. It is the cradle of ancient civilisations: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and other religions coexist in the region, which is also the hub of global economic achievement. Nations with significant regional and global influence, such as China, India, and Japan, and middle powers, such as the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Australia, and Pakistan, are today reshaping the international political, security, economic, energy, and high-tech architecture.

While Japan, South Korea, and Australia are committed to defence ties with the US, the other middle powers in the Asia-Pacific pursue policies of balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and neutrality in response to the US-China strategic competitions. ASEAN, for instance, rejects the idea of a “new Cold War” in the region and asserts strategic autonomy in the face of great power rivalry. However, it is noteworthy that the burgeoning competition in the Asia-Pacific is taking place amidst significant initiatives to link the economically vibrant region through trade, investment, and logistical connectivity. Long cut off by mountains, rivers, and seas, and with time-consuming and

costly land transport historically, the Asia-Pacific countries had to rely on the Western maritime powers of Europe and the US, their main economic and trade partners. In the new era, the construction of highways, railways, power grids, and information networks has accelerated, enhancing connectivity among the Asia-Pacific countries, an effort that has overcome the natural disadvantage in the past two centuries.

### **3. Context**

The rise of Asia-Pacific "middle powers", the escalating great-power competition, and the emerging re-groupings in the Asia-Pacific, Indian Ocean, and the Gulf have brought both opportunity and challenge to the GCC countries, Iraq and Iran. On the one hand, the Gulf countries harvest economic opportunities generated by the rise of the Asia-Pacific economy; on the other hand, they avoid political entanglements in US-China high-tech rivalries, Japan-China political entanglements, and China-India mutual distrust.

The Gulf countries are reluctant to get involved in great power competition in the Asia-Pacific and are choosing hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning policies simultaneously according to their national interests. Iran has joined the SCO and the BRICS, appealing to build a "Global East"; the UAE has joined the I2U2, the BRI, IMEC, and AIIB; Saudi Arabia has consolidated its predominant role in the GCC, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, OPEC+, IMEC, etc. These Gulf countries are maximising security, economic, trade, and energy interest while minimizing political and security risks.

At present, The Asia-Pacific region accounts for approximately the same share of the world economy as the G7 and its contribution to world economic growth will constantly increase in the future. The Asia-Pacific is increasingly dependent on the Gulf energy supply. Countries in East and Southeast Asia, as well as Oceania, are "looking west"; countries in West Asia are "looking east," enhancing the cohesion of "Asianess."

Likewise, Iran, Türkiye, and Arab countries have slowly but surely regained their Asian identities, and these countries have actively integrated into the SCO and the BRICS while watching closely the US and other Western powers' response. Great power rivalries in the Asia-Pacific and the regional conflicts in West Asia may be mingled, posing a significant threat to the Gulf's economic and political environment.

### **4. Focus/Objectives**

Taken as a whole, the Asia-Pacific countries are the Gulf countries' most important geo-economic partners. At the same time, the Western powers remain the most fundamental geopolitical partners of the Gulf. While Iran has built close ties with China and Russia, the GCC countries, with longstanding security ties with the US and other Western powers, have, in recent years, begun to assert strategic autonomy and seek flexible political and diplomatic engagements with the West and the East to harvest benefit while minimise risks.

In this workshop, we examine the theory, history, dynamics, processes, and prospects of the Asia-Pacific competitions, ranging from territorial disputes and resource competition to great power political and technological rivalries. Apart from China and the US, the third important player in regional geopolitics and geo-economics is India. With substantial political and economic ties across Asia and Western states, led by the US, India bridges the "Global West" with the "Global South".

While India is a member of the Indo-Pacific QUAD, the I2U2, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), it has also institutionalised its relations with its Asian neighbours through entities such as BIMSTEC, SCO, BRICS, and the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity, which sets out the roadmap for long-term ASEAN-India engagement. India's leaders have affirmed that India upholds strategic autonomy in its foreign policy.

The Asia-Pacific, a combination of power, geography, and developmental ideas, is not a monolithic entity but a political-economic-civilizational complex formed by the interplay of different sub-regions of Asia. With increasingly frequent political, economic, trade, and cultural exchanges among East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, Asia's regional integration has achieved great headway, the cross-regional linkage has been enhanced, and the consciousness of Asian identity has been consolidated.

## 5. References

While the literature on the precise field we are interested in remains limited, we would encourage those submitting papers to take note of the following works and where possible to build upon them:

1. Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Yukiko Miyagi, *The Emerging Middle East-East Asia Nexus*, London: Routledge, 2015.
2. Ikenberry, G. John, "Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 1, 2024, pp. 121-122.
3. Kowner, Rotem, Yoram Evron and P.R. Kumaraswamy, *East-West Asia Relations in the 21st Century :From Bilateral to Interregional Relationships*, London: Routledge, 2023.
4. Müller, Martin, In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 74-755.
5. Niblock, Tim, Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (eds), *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2017.
6. Niblock, Tim, Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (eds), *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2018.
7. Proń, Elżbieta, *International Institutions in China's Foreign Policy: The Case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Torun: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2021.
8. Sim, Li-Chen, and Jonathan Fulton, *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security*, London and New York: Routledge, 2023.
9. Sun, Degang, et. al, *China's Holistic Diplomacy towards the Arab Countries: A Perspective of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum*, Seoul: Xinxing Publisher, 2024.
10. Tagliacozzo, Eric, *Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
11. Trenin, Dmitri, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente*, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015.
12. Trubina, Elina, David Gogishvili, Nadja Imhof & Martin Müller, "A Part of the World or Apart from the World? The Postsocialist Global East in the Geopolitics of Knowledge," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2020, pp. 636-662.
13. Zoubir, Yahia H., *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa*, London and New York: Routledge, 2023.

## 6. Papers Focus/Topics

-The Asia-Pacific countries are the main consumers of the Gulf's hydrocarbon resources. -Great power competitions pose a potential threat to the supply chain of the Gulf oil and natural gas exports to the Asia-Pacific regions.

-China, India, Japan, the UK, the United States, and the EU have either built hard military bases or soft military presence in the Gulf and beyond. How can great powers co-exist in the Gulf, and what are the potential conflicts?

-The flash points in the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and Asia-Pacific countries' territorial disputes may threaten the Gulf countries' investment interests in the Asia-Pacific regions.

-The great power competition for high-tech standards, know-how, and market may compel the Gulf countries to choose between the West and the Asia-Pacific countries.

-The various developmental and political-security initiatives, such as BRI, I2U2, the IMEC, the SCO, the BRICS, and NATO, among others, may cause institutional rivalry in the Gulf.

-The new energy, financial, and digital cooperation between the Asia-Pacific and the Gulf has been consolidated. However, great power competition in the Asia-Pacific regions may spill over the Gulf, such as petro-dollar vs. petro-RMB.

-The Red Sea and the Horn of Africa are witnessing the effects of regional and big power rivalries that have left the region fragile and vulnerable to external machinations.

-Great power competition in the Asia-Pacific region may potentially have an impact on migrations in the Gulf.

-China and US have rivalries in discourse and narratives for modernisations of the Gulf countries, i.e., the "Beijing Consensus" (development first; strong government and sovereignty first, etc.) vis-à-vis the "Washington Consensus" (democracy first, a strong society and human rights first, etc.). They offer two different models of development for the Gulf countries.

-The potential mediation roles of the Gulf countries in the Asia-Pacific conflict resolution and de-escalation.

## **7. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format**

Authors should refer to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

## **8. Publication Plans**

The three workshop directors are all the editorial board members of the Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. In the past six years, all the selected papers have been published as special issues of Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, a double-blind review journal (indexed as ESCI). We will select quality papers for a special issue of the Journal. Papers that cannot fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

## **9. Directors' Bio Notes**

**Tim Niblock** is Chair Professor in the Institute for International and Area Studies at Tsinghua University, and Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He has held the position of Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies (2009-2014), Vice-Chair of the UK Council of Area Studies Associations (2010-2014), and Vice-President of the British Society for Middle East Studies (2009-2012). He was the founding Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He has previously served at the University of the University of Reading and the University of Durham. Between 1969 and 1977, he was Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Khartoum.

Among his published books are: *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun, 2018); *Conflict Resolution and the*

Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region (edited, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun); Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region (edited, with Yang Guang, 2014); Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century. The Local to Global Transformation (edited, with Monica Malik, 2013), The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia (2007), Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival (2006), 'Pariah States' and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya and Sudan (2001), Class and Power in Sudan (1987), Iraq: the Contemporary State (edited, 1982), State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia (edited, 1981), and Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf (edited, 1980).

**Talmiz Ahmad** joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974 and was posted to Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen, and then as Consul General in Jeddah, in 1987-90. After appointments in New York, London and Pretoria, he became the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000. He did two stints as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, besides being ambassador to Oman and the UAE, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, and Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he was in the corporate sector in Dubai. From 2016, he has been a full-time academic. He holds the Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune. He has authored four books: Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates (2005); Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms (2010); The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring (2013). His latest book, West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games, was published in April 2022. He writes and lectures regularly on political Islam, the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, and energy security issues.

**Degang Sun** is Professor of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, and Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He was Deputy Director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, China, and he was a visiting scholar at Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (September 2018-September 2019), and Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, and an Academic Visitor to Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013), Denver University (2007-2008), and Hong Kong University (2004-2005). His research interests are Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations, Great Powers' Strategies in the Middle East, and China's Middle East Diplomacy. He has published over 50 papers in peer-reviewed journals, such as Mediterranean Politics, Middle East Policy, Journal of Contemporary China, China: An International Journal, and Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies. His latest book is China's Holistic Diplomacy Towards the Arab Countries: A Perspective of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (Seoul: Xinxing Publisher, 2024).