A decorative horizontal band at the top of the page featuring a repeating geometric pattern of triangles, diamonds, and lines in a light teal color.

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A low-angle photograph looking up at numerous flagpoles against a clear blue sky. Various national flags are flying, including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and others. The image has a teal overlay at the bottom where the title is located.

Navigating Multipolarity: The GCC, Multilateral Institutions, and Global Order in 2026



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The state of the global order as 2026 approaches is not merely evolving, it is undergoing a structural transition. The post-Cold War multilateral system, anchored in Western-led institutions and liberal norms, is increasingly contested by a re-emerging power-based logic driven by strategic rivalry, coercive economic statecraft, and selective adherence to rules. While major powers seek to replace institutional constraint with spheres of influence and transactional dominance, this shift risks producing a fragmented international system that benefits few and destabilizes many.

Within this transition, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states occupy a paradoxical and constrained position. While they have been deeply embedded in, and at times supportive of, the existing international order, their current engagement is less about collectively shaping a new global architecture than about managing exposure to its fragmentation. GCC states are responding pragmatically to systemic uncertainty by prioritizing de-escalation, crisis management, and strategic hedging in areas of direct national interest.

This is most visible in their diplomatic engagement: Saudi-led efforts to reduce regional tensions through dialogue with Iran, the UAE's emphasis on conflict de-escalation and economic diplomacy, and Qatar's mediation in regional and international crises, illustrate a shared preference

for stability-orientated statecraft. While these initiatives do not constitute a unified GCC vision for reshaping the global order, they nonetheless highlight differing national approaches within the Gulf. Taken together, they reflect a broad recognition across GCC states that sustained regional instability carries significant economic and security implications, reinforcing the incentive to pursue pragmatic and risk-mitigating diplomacy.

This dynamic helps explain the GCC's current diplomatic approach. Gulf states are not rejecting multilateral cooperation, nor are they comfortable with a global order driven by unrestrained power politics, as both extremes undermine stability, predictability, and their own strategic autonomy. Instead, they view effective multilateral institutions as essential tools for managing competition, mitigating conflict, and safeguarding economic and security interests in an increasingly fragmented system.

As a result, GCC countries are positioning themselves as reform-oriented actors that seek to preserve the value of multilateral institutions while adapting them to a multipolar reality. Their objective is to ensure that these institutions remain relevant, inclusive, and capable of managing shifting power balances without becoming instruments of dominance by any single state or bloc.



Photo Source: [UN](#) (2025)

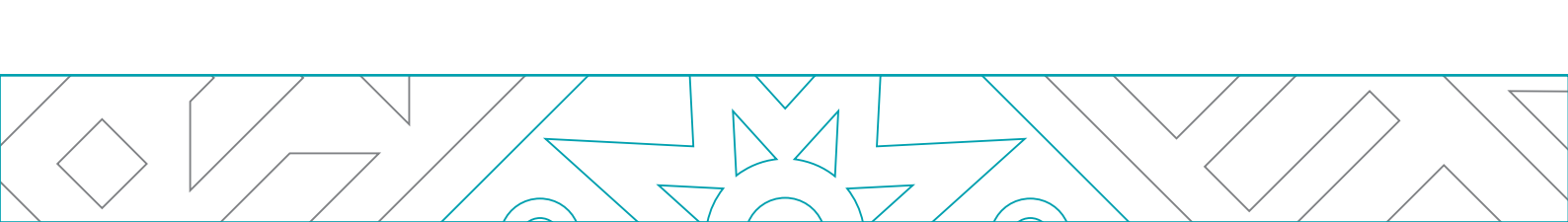
Rejecting a Purely Power-Based Global System

The renewed emphasis on power-centric approaches to global governance, reflected in the expanded use of sanctions, the politicization of economic interdependence, and increasingly rigid bloc dynamics, has highlighted the vulnerabilities of the current international transition. While such instruments may yield tactical advantages for major powers, their broader systemic effects are more ambiguous, particularly for energy-producing states, emerging economies, and regions already exposed to geopolitical and economic volatility.

Rather than contesting the role of major powers, Gulf diplomacy has been guided largely by pragmatic national interests. GCC states have prioritized flexibility and balance to safeguard their security, economic resilience, and political autonomy in a more uncertain international environment. This has translated into a strategy

of diversified external partnerships, sustaining longstanding security relationships while expanding economic, technological, and political engagement across Asia, Europe, and the Global South. Seen in this light, the Gulf's approach is less about actively shaping a new world order than about adapting to one in flux. By avoiding rigid alignment structures and preserving strategic options, GCC states aim to protect their interests and leave room to maneuver as global power dynamics continue to shift.

In parallel, Gulf engagement in conflict mediation and dialogue facilitation has reflected a preference for inclusive approaches. By supporting diplomatic platforms and confidence-building mechanisms in a range of regional and international contexts, GCC states have sought to demonstrate that stability is more likely to emerge from dialogue and institutional legitimacy than from dominance or coercion.



Taken together, these positions point to a consistent Gulf perspective: that an international system governed primarily by power risks amplifying instability, whereas adaptable, credible, and inclusive institutions offer a more sustainable basis for managing competition. This stance reflects a pragmatic assessment of contemporary geopolitics and a strategic interest in preserving stability during a period of systemic transformation.

Gulf states have embraced what can be described as *institutional pluralism*: engaging simultaneously with established multilateral bodies, emerging platforms, and informal diplomatic mechanisms. This approach reflects a recognition that no single institutional order currently commands universal legitimacy.

The GCC as Shapers of Multilateral Debate

The GCC's expanding role as a diplomatic convener illustrates how Gulf states are reshaping multilateral practice at a time of institutional paralysis. As formal multilateral bodies struggle with political deadlock, GCC actors have increasingly filled gaps by facilitating mediation, sustaining dialogue, and enabling humanitarian outcomes where official mechanisms stall.

Saudi Arabia exemplifies this approach. It has hosted dialogue formats on conflicts such as those in Sudan and Yemen while supporting humanitarian coordination and confidence-building initiatives alongside UN-led processes. These efforts do not seek to replace existing institutions but to preserve diplomatic momentum when formal tracks are constrained.

This convening role has extended to core global issues. In late 2024, Saudi Arabia co-launched the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution with the European Union and Norway. The initiative moves beyond declaratory support by aligning states and international organizations around concrete action, upholding international law, expanding humanitarian access, ending occupation, and supporting Palestinian

self-determination through coordinated diplomatic pressure.

Saudi Arabia reinforced this role in September 2025 by co-chairing, with France, the UN High-Level International Conference in New York on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine. Held at a moment of acute regional tension, the conference demonstrated Riyadh's ability to mobilize broad international participation around a politically sensitive agenda and re-anchor dialogue where institutional processes had fragmented.

Qatar has similarly leveraged its long-standing ties with state and non-state actors to act as a critical intermediary in active conflicts. Most notably, Doha has maintained channels with Hamas throughout the Israel-Gaza conflict to facilitate hostage exchanges, support ceasefire negotiations, and enable humanitarian access during periods of escalation. This role reflects pragmatic diplomacy aimed at reducing civilian harm and sustaining communication where few actors retain credible access to all parties.

The United Arab Emirates has pursued a complementary model, combining humanitarian diplomacy, development assistance, and quiet mediation, particularly in fragile and post-conflict settings. In the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia and Somalia, the UAE has emphasized infrastructure support, humanitarian relief, and institutional capacity-building alongside discreet diplomatic engagement. Rather than public mediation, this approach prioritizes delivery, continuity, and local engagement as stabilizing tools.

Collectively, these practices reflect a form of informal multilateralism that operates through flexible, ad hoc arrangements while complementing formal institutions. By engaging actors across geopolitical and ideological divides, GCC states help keep diplomatic channels open, reduce escalation risks, and support international efforts that lack access or leverage.

Taken together, the GCC experience points to an alternative model of influence, one rooted not in coercion, but in convening power, credibility, financial capacity, and the ability to deliver

outcomes. In a fragmented and multipolar system, access, trust, and practical problem-solving are increasingly central to shaping diplomacy and managing conflict.



Photo Source: AA (202)

Structural Risks and Strategic Constraints Facing the GCC

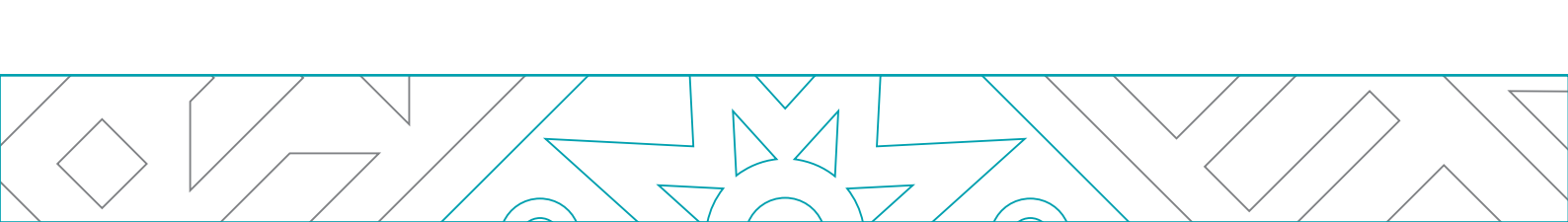
As the global order continues to transition, GCC states are operating in an environment that is becoming more complex and less predictable. This does not negate the Gulf's growing diplomatic engagement, but it does place clear constraints on how far and how fast GCC countries can advance their interests in a fragmented global setting.

One key consideration is the increase of competition among major powers, which increasingly extends beyond traditional security domains into economic policy, technology, and critical infrastructure. For GCC states, maintaining diversified partnerships in such an environment requires careful calibration, as external pressures may complicate efforts to balance longstanding relationships with emerging opportunities. For GCC states, maintaining diversified partnerships under these conditions requires constant

adjustments and careful management, particularly in sectors linked to long-term economic transformation.

A related issue concerns the uneven performance of multilateral institutions. While GCC countries continue to see value in multilateral cooperation, many global bodies have struggled to respond effectively to crises or to adapt to shifting power realities. This has reduced the predictability that institutions once provided and has, at times, placed greater responsibility on regional actors to help manage emerging challenges through ad hoc or complementary diplomatic efforts.

Regional dynamics further shape the GCC's strategic outlook. Although relations within the Gulf have stabilised and coordination has improved in several areas, differences in national priorities and policy approaches remain. These variations are not unusual in a regional grouping, but they can slow the development of common



positions on sensitive regional and international issues, particularly in periods of heightened uncertainty.

The persistence of instability in the Gulf's wider neighborhood also presents an enduring strategic consideration. Conflicts and tensions in nearby regions carry direct implications for maritime security, energy markets, and humanitarian conditions. Managing these external pressures while pursuing domestic economic and social objectives remains an ongoing balancing act for GCC governments.

Finally, as GCC states take on more visible roles in diplomacy, mediation, and dialogue facilitation, expectations surrounding their engagement are likely to increase. Ensuring that these efforts remain aligned with broader international processes, and that ambitions are matched with realistic assessments of what diplomacy can deliver, will be important for maintaining credibility over time.

Overall, these challenges underline the context in which GCC states are navigating the current international transition. Continued pragmatism, coordination, and investment in diplomatic capacity will be essential as they seek to protect their interests and contribute to stability in an increasingly unsettled global environment.

Conclusion

As the international system heads into 2026, it is increasingly fragmented and unpredictable. Shared rules are under strain, major-power competition is intensifying, and multilateral institutions are struggling to adapt to shifting power dynamics. For the GCC states, this is not a moment to redesign the global order, but to navigate its erosion with care.

The Gulf response has been shaped less by ambition than by risk management. Rather than pursuing rigid alignments or grand systemic visions, GCC states have prioritized de-escalation, mediation, and strategic flexibility. Their sustained engagement with both formal and informal multilateral frameworks reflects a pragmatic assessment: institutions may be weakened, but they remain essential channels for managing conflict, coordinating action, and preserving dialogue.

This approach is neither transformative nor without constraints. In a region defined by persistent conflict and a global environment marked by sharpening rivalries, GCC diplomacy cannot resolve structural tensions on its own. Yet it offers a functional model of adaptation. By preserving room for maneuver, investing in convening power, and focusing on stability over dominance, GCC states are managing uncertainty rather than seeking to control it.

In a transitional international order, this form of cautious, interest-driven diplomacy may represent the Gulf's most credible contribution, not to reshaping the system, but to preventing its further fragmentation.