

Commentary

MIDDLE POWERS & THE CASE FOR FOREGOING POLARITY

Lina Khatib

There is an ongoing debate about the rise of middle powers in the world, including in the Gulf, and where this rise fits in the mechanics of the international system. This debate sometimes places those middle powers in the context of what some observers see as rising multipolarity. But the notion of polarity itself, while a useful tool in international relations theory for decades, is no longer suitable for understanding the fluid power dynamics in the world, including in the Gulf.

The region is moving away from clearly defined political configurations that cut across all aspects of foreign policy. Instead, Gulf states are pursuing foreign policies that serve their distinct national interests. It would therefore be simplistic to attempt to understand the behavior of Gulf countries mainly through the prism of their relationships with any superpower or aspiring superpower. The argument here is that the notion of polarity as a lens through which to understand the fluid dynamics of Gulf foreign policies risks overlooking their agency and desire for maintaining strategic autonomy and optionality in the international system.

POLARITY & BIPOLARITY

In international relations, polarity refers to the way power is distributed across the international system. The idea of a pole is not just about a state's possession of power, but also about this power enabling the state to attract other states and shape their behaviors and loyalties. The notion of polarity therefore assumes that the structure of the international system is based on certain states acting as pillars of significant international influence.

The Cold War era is commonly described as bipolar, with the United States (US) and the Soviet Union occupying opposing poles in the international system. During this era, some countries in the Middle East like Syria and Libya placed themselves squarely in the anti-American camp (despite these two countries officially being members of the Non-Aligned Movement), with Syria being one of the Arab countries explicitly flaunting a close relationship with the Soviet Union.

Although many variations existed in the way the US and Soviet political and economic models were implemented domestically and internationally, overall, there was little ideological ambiguity during this era when it came to what those models represented. One pole was about political pluralism and the free market, and the other pole about one-party rule and state ownership of the principal means of production.

Many countries in the world aligned themselves with one pole or the other while some countries chose nonalignment. However, even this categorization oversimplifies how foreign policies played out. In the case of Gulf countries, while predominantly allied with the Western camp, their foreign policies did not simply follow the US lead. For

example, Saudi Arabia led the 1973 oil embargo against the US and other countries in protest of their support for Israel.

At present, it has become commonplace to read about the rise of China as a potential challenger to the US in the international order. However, contestation of oversimplification is just as necessary now as it was during the Cold War. The Gulf countries are not pivoting to Asia at the expense of their relationships with the West. During the pandemic, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increased its cooperation with China on Covid vaccine development and distribution. Bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and China has more than doubled over the past decade. However, these examples are not indicative of the Gulf countries aligning themselves with China over the US. After all, Gulf oil exports are in US dollars, and the largest beneficiary of foreign investments by Gulf sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) is the US.

Nor do China's expanding economic relations make it a political pole akin to the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. China aims to compete with the US economically but, unlike the Soviet Union, it is not seeking to export a revolutionary political model. Nor does it wield the kind of power that can shape the behavior of other states such that they turn their backs on the US. The notion of bipolarity risks mischaracterizing China's status, goals, and capabilities.

MULTIPOLARITY

In contrast to the oversimplification of framing the Gulf's international relations in terms of US-China bipolarity, some see the region's international relations as part of an order defined by multipolarity. India is sometimes cited in this model as another rising pole besides the US and China, while BRICS and its expanding membership are also presented as an example of a multipolar world that has replaced the post-Cold War system of US unipolarity.

One main shortcoming of understanding the contemporary international order through the lens of multipolarity is that doing so inherently assumes a degree of equality among the various poles. The reality is that there are significant disparities among major and middle powers. Another limitation to adopting the lens of multipolarity is assuming the existence of several poles in the first place; to qualify as a pole, a state must have enough power to attract and shape the behavior of other states. Scrutinizing relative power in the current international system reveals that only one state has such overwhelmingly dominant power: the US. In 2024, it threatened BRICS members with sanctions if they pursued actions that could undermine the US dollar and the broader US-dominated international order more generally.

BEYOND POLARITY

However, this does not mean that the unipolarity of the post-Cold War era still accurately describes the US position in the international system. While reasoning based on polarity is correct in attributing supremacy to the US, the lens of polarity inaccurately implies that the nature of the relationship between the US and its allies is a blanket top-down hegemony. Gulf countries are a powerful example that this is not the case.

The Gulf states have cultivated deep political, economic, and security partnerships with the US. However, they are also diversifying their relationships, signing security agreements with European and Asian partners and economic agreements across all continents. While remaining politically aligned with the US, they have also expressed disagreements over its handling of key foreign policy files such as Iran and Israel. Driven by national interest, Gulf countries diverge in the paths they have pursued regarding these issues.

The deliberate fluidity of Gulf countries' foreign policies is reflective of their desire to maintain strategic autonomy and optionality. Adopting the lens of polarity thus risks overlooking the agency of the Gulf states when they are striving to avoid complete dependence on any one nation for security and prosperity. Recognizing US supremacy does not negate this agency.

About the Author



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September 2026

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