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The Stance of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has global and regional dimensions with deep implications for international security. The war poses strategic questions also for the actors from the Persian Gulf region as it affects them directly and indirectly in terms of security relationships, energy markets, and economic stability. Three Arab Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar – experience contradictory incentives and disincentives with regard to their reaction to the war in Ukraine. This article aims to analyze the stance of those three key Arab Gulf players towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the first year of the full-scale war. In the article, we argue that the stance of those three Arab Gulf states can be analyzed through Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as their reaction is best explained through a regional perspective. The article offers a comprehensive explanation, emphasizing the importance of the intra-Gulf security dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, RCST, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar

Stanowisko Arabii Saudyjskiej, Zjednoczonych Emiratów Arabskich i Kataru w sprawie inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę

ABSTRAKT

Rozpoczęta w lutym 2022 r. rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę stwarza istotne konsekwencje dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego. Wywiera ona wpływ również na państwa regionu Zatoki Perskiej, gdyż pośrednio i bezpośrednio oddziałuje na kwestie związane z ich bezpieczeństwem, rynkami energii oraz stabilnością gospodarczą. Arabia Saudyjska, Zjednoczone Emiraty Arabskie (ZEA) i Katar – mając zróżnicowane i częściowo sprzeczne interesy – zajmują niejednoznaczną postawę wobec konfliktu. Artykuł ma na celu analizę stanowiska tych trzech kluczowych aktorów państwowych z regionu Zatoki Perskiej wobec rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę w pierwszym roku pełnowymiarowej wojny. W artykule argumentujemy, że stanowisko tych państw można analizować za pomocą teorii regionalnych kompleksów bezpieczeństwa (RSCT), bowiem ich reakcję najlepiej wyjaśnia właśnie perspektywa regionalna. Artykuł przedstawia kompleksowe wyjaśnienie polityki tych trzech monarchii wobec konfliktu w Ukrainie, wskazując na znaczenie dynamiki stosunków bezpieczeństwa w regionie Zatoki Perskiej.

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has global, regional, and local dimensions with deep implications for international security (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2022, p. 225). With regard to a regional dimension, the war also poses strategic and policy questions for the actors in the Persian Gulf region as it affects them directly and indirectly in terms of security relationships, energy markets, and economic stability.

In the last two decades, the three most internationally active and influential Arab Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar – have diversified their external relations by pivoting to China, India, and Russia, which have emerged as partners for them in various spheres. Therefore, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has posed a challenge to the three monarchies in terms of how to navigate between the expectations of their traditional ally – the United States – and the need to pursue their interests in the context of changing patterns of international relations, both in the region and in the world (Szalai, 2022, p. 3).

Naturally, the war has been seen as an indicator of various states' loyalty or at least inclination towards either Russia or the U.S. The three Gulf states,

with their complex relations with both global powers, have been of interest to many analysts since the very beginning of the full-scale military invasion (Ulrichsen, 2022; Chausovsky, 2023; Cafiero, 2023). The existing literature on the Gulf region mostly focuses on the origins and evaluation of the conflicts in the Persian Gulf (Askari, 2013). Besides that, a significant amount of work is analyzing and explaining the strategic rivalry between regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the Gulf region (Calabrese, 2020). Nevertheless, the studies on security and threat perception in the region occupy a large place in the literature (Gause, 2011; Hashim, 2022; Keynoush, 2016; Gause, 2007). On the other hand, the studies regarding Gulf states' external relations with Russia usually approach the topic as a whole (Issaev & Kozhanov, 2021; Legrenzi & Lawson, 2019).

However, due to the recent character of the conflict, there is a scarcity of scientific sources aimed at explaining the stance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. The impact of the earlier phase of the Ukraine crisis on Middle East politics has been noticed (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2017, p. 61), but now, as we have turned into the second year of the full-scale war, it is the right moment to offer a more comprehensive and theory-guided analysis.

The article aims to analyze and explain the stance of the three key Arab Gulf states - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar - towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the first year of the full-scale war and to offer an explanation of the three monarchies' attitude. They all are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and share some key domestic characteristics and regional concerns. On the other hand, there are also important differences in their security needs. We argue that their behavior should be seen primarily as representing political and economic concerns deeply embedded within the security dynamics of the Gulf region. Hence, we apply Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as an analytical framework guiding our explanatory exercise.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we discuss the Gulf as a regional security complex. Then, building on it, we depict the roles the U.S. and Russia play in the region as external powers. Next, we present the stance of the analyzed states on the war, taking into consideration both materialist and idealist dimensions - the three states' verbal actions and voting in the United Nations Security Council as well as more 'material' actions, mainly related to economic relations and support provided to Ukraine (or lack thereof). Finally, drawing on the previously analyzed roles of the U.S. and Russia in the Gulf security complex, we explain the stance of the three states in question towards the war in Ukraine.

Persian Gulf as a regional security complex

Regional Security Complex Theory was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver as an analytical tool suitable for explaining security relations between states in the post-Cold War era. It is based on the idea that “most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones.” Therefore, “security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 3–4). The theory builds both on materialist and power-oriented neorealism as well as on an essentially constructivist idea of securitization, developed by the same authors together with Jaap de Wilde (Buzan et al., 1998).

The basic premise of RSCT is that in the post-Cold War world, the patterns of international relations have changed due to the end of the bipolar world. Freed from the rivalry with the Soviet Union, the U.S. has become less engaged in various regional security issues. Consequently, states acting on a regional level gained more maneuver in their foreign policies, and “many regional level security dynamics appeared to get more operational autonomy than they had had before because of the increased indifference of the global powers to them” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 18).

The original conceptualization of RSCT was focused on state actors. It defined an RSC as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1983, p. 106). However, later on, the definition was broadened as, in 1998, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde defined an RSC as “a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” and explaining that “security complexes are about relative intensities of security relations that lead to distinctive regional patterns shaped by both the distribution of power and relations of amity and enmity” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 201).

A regional security complex is characterized by a number of variables:

- a) boundary – RSCs are territorially bounded and distinguishable from their neighbors;
- b) anarchic structure – composition of at least two autonomous units;
- c) polarity – understood as the distribution of power between units;
- d) social construction – refers to the patterns of amity and enmity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 53).

Security interdependencies are to be understood and analyzed through a multi-sectoral perspective (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. xvi-xvii). RSCT

builds on the concept of security sectors, developed by the authors in their previous work in which they distinguished five such sectors: political, military, economic, societal, and environmental (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 7). In the article, we focus on the first three sectors, as we consider them the most important in explaining the stance of the three states in question towards the war in Ukraine.

Although RSCT is less an explanatory tool and rather an analytical model, it offers an interesting theoretical framework capturing both intra- and inter-regional dynamics as well as materialist and idealist aspects of security challenges.

The question arises: can the Persian Gulf region be considered a regional security complex? The authors of RSCT have distinguished the Middle East as a security complex, while the Gulf has been defined as a sub-complex. Sub-complexes are essentially characterized by the same features. The only difference is that “a sub-complex is firmly embedded within a larger RSC. Sub-complexes represent distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nonetheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the RSC as a whole” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 51). This logic of treating the Gulf region as a sub-complex is also followed by other authors (Han & Hakimian, 2019) while F. Gregory Gause conceptualizes the region as a separate RSC consisting of Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the small Arab Gulf monarchies (2010).

Regardless of the two approaches possible, for the purpose of this article, the Gulf region is understood as a separate regional security complex, as the focus is on Russia and the United States as external powers penetrating the region and having in it interests to a considerable degree distinct from those they pursue in other parts of the Middle East. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime and a subsequent radical shift in Iraq’s international position, the Gulf RSC can be conceived as consisting of two competing regional powers: Iran and Saudi Arabia, while other states either bandwagon with Saudi Arabia (to a lesser or greater extent) or try to hedge those powers and avoid taking sides.

For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Iran, with its anti-Western and revolutionary rhetoric, ties with the Shia communities across the region, and ability to influence non-state actors in the region, poses a primary threat to their regime stability and regional interests. However, for Qatar, it is Saudi Arabia that is the biggest concern as the Kingdom seeks to limit Doha’s ambitious foreign policy, and in recent years, there have been more serious tensions between Qatar and its nominal Arab allies than with Iran (Yom, 2018).

According to RSCT, global-level powers can penetrate regional security complexes, and “the expectation is that outside powers will be drawn into a re-

gion along the lines of rivalry existing within it” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 52). In the Gulf region, it is to a large extent true, as visible in Russia-Iran cooperation vs. U.S.-GCC partnerships, but these two external powers have also tried to overcome the regional rivalries and build relations with “the other side.”

The U.S.’ role in the Persian Gulf

As Buzan and Wæver have noted, “Superpowers must be active players in processes of securitization and de-securitization in all, or nearly all, of the regions in the system, whether as threats, guarantors, allies, or interveners” (2003, p. 35). The U.S. has played all of these roles in the Persian Gulf states.

From World War II to Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979, the region was important predominantly due to its oil resources and as an arena for rivalry with the Soviet Union. In 1949, the U.S. National Security Council frankly acknowledged that the Gulf region was “critically important to American security” (Yetiv & Oskarsson, 2018, p. 18). Furthermore, the importance of the region was expressed by President Jimmy Carter, who said in his State of the Union Address “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (Carter, 1980). As Mark Katz noticed “by the late 1970s, seven of the Gulf states (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman) were allied with the United States, the eighth (Iraq) with the Soviet Union” (2017, p. 103). In the 1970s, there were two key points that significantly increased U.S. involvement in the region. First, after the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, the U.S. took over the responsibility for the region’s security. Second, in 1979, the revolution in Iran ended the rule of one of the main U.S. allies in the Middle East and brought to power an anti-American regime which was also perceived by the Arab Gulf states as a major threat. The Arab rulers had to rely then on the U.S. protection. However, despite persistent mutual interests, in recent years, a number of challenges have been observed in the U.S. relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies. The “abandonment” of the U.S.’ long-standing ally – Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak – during the Arab uprisings in 2011 as well as some sympathy expressed towards protesters in Bahrain, undermined the unquestionability of the U.S. support to its regional allies (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018, p. 617). Furthermore, the conclusion of the landmark nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 was perceived as further alienation of the Saudi monarchy (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018, p. 617).

The situation changed when Donald Trump became U.S. President in 2017. The U.S. withdrew from the deal with Iran in 2018 and took a more confrontational stance towards the regime in Teheran. His tenure was also marked by intra-GCC tensions, which manifested themselves in the 2017 blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on Qatar (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). According to some media reports, even military action against the tiny sheikhdom was considered, but U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson played a key role in preventing such a scenario (Emmons, 2018).

Since 2020, when Joseph Biden started his tenure as current U.S. president, the political relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have again been tested. Even before, Biden said that he would make Saudi Arabia “the pariah that they are,” referring to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 (Baker & Hubbard, 2022). The U.S. has also started fresh negotiations with Iran on restoring a nuclear deal (Lee & Madhani, 2022). As for the relations with the UAE, the two parties have diverse views on normalizing relationships with Syria since the Emirates is willing to strengthen ties with Assad.

In the military sector, there are two key pillars of the U.S.’ significance to the region. First, defense agreements and U.S. military presence with its state-of-the-art military equipment. The U.S. concluded a number of defense agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman in 1991, with Qatar in 1992, and with the UAE in 1994. Although Saudi Arabia decided not to formalize the security cooperation under such a form, the U.S. was granted access to the Kingdom’s air bases. In addition, Bahrain was designated as a major non-NA-TO ally in 2002, and Kuwait was granted this status two years later (Yetiv & Oskarsson, 2018). There is no other power that can offer a similar level of military protection to the three states. The second factor is also related to the arms trade. The U.S. has been a major arms provider to each of the three states in question, with the value of U.S.-made weapons exceeding 50% of their total arms imports between 2000 and 2019. Furthermore, the U.S. has provided some of its most advanced weapons, e.g., the THAAD missile defense system, sold to the UAE as the first system sale abroad (Thomas et al., 2020).

On the other hand, serious cracks have appeared in this picture in recent years, an example of which is the controversial and unfinalized sale of F-35 fighter jets to the UAE (Kilani, 2022) yet. Furthermore, some U.S. lawmakers have made attempts at stopping arms sales to the Gulf states over the concerns related to the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and the overall poor human rights record of the Gulf monarchies. Despite the failure of these attempts and new deals announced (Al-Monitor Staff, 2022), the perspective of condition-

ing other major sales on the nature and scope of the Gulf states' relationship with China and Russia as well as on the improvements of the human rights remains.

As discussed above, the key reason for the U.S. involvement in the Gulf security complex for decades was its importance for oil supplies on which America heavily depended. The picture is different now, however. In 2021 the Gulf countries accounted for only 8% of the U.S. total petroleum imports (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). The U.S. is not the main export destination for any of the three analyzed states (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). It does not mean, however, that the U.S. no longer has interests in securing the free flow of oil through the Gulf. As any serious disruptions to oil exports from the Arab Gulf states can increase global energy prices and impact U.S. domestic politics (Yetiv & Oskarsson, 2018, p. 28). Furthermore, the Gulf states can, to some extent, affect oil and gas prices in global markets. As discussed below, the U.S. wanted to use exactly this opportunity to prevent oil prices from a major increase after the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

Undoubtedly, the U.S. has still been a major security provider to the three states discussed in the article. While for Saudis and, to some extent, the UAE, it is especially important in the face of Iran's regional policies, for Qatar, it is mainly a warranty against possible hostile actions of the other GCC members. In March 2022, Qatar was granted the status of a major non-NATO ally (The White House, 2022) as the third GCC member state. This decision confirms the importance of bilateral relations between the emirate and the U.S. and enhances Qatar's position vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

On the other hand, the overall trust in the durability of U.S. support has been undermined among the Gulf states in recent years. Furthermore, the U.S. significance for its economic security relies mainly on securing the free flow of oil and gas through the Strait of Hormuz, which is also in the American interest as it affects global energy prices. Overall, cooperation with the U.S. in various dimensions is still a very important factor, significantly enhancing Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar's position within the Gulf security complex. Nevertheless, the aspects discussed above and the general perception of the weakening of the U.S. interest in the region alter the three monarchies' security calculations for the near and long-term future.

Russia's role in the Gulf

The Middle East has been important for Russia historically and strategically. As external powers, Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union have competed in the

Middle East with the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire. During the Cold War, the Soviets similarly engaged in competition with the U.S. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to an uncontested Pax-Americana in the region (Kennan Institute and Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2022). However, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and the U.S. declining interest in the region after the Arab uprisings in 2011, the quest to diversify the relations of the Gulf monarchies prompted Russia to become more interested in the Persian Gulf region.

According to Zvyagelskaya, Russia's strategy towards the region is fivefold: "Supporting friendly regimes and forces in the region, and building lasting geopolitical alliances with them; Establishing a modicum of Russian military presence in and around the region; Expanding Russia's presence in the region's arms, nuclear, oil and gas, food, and other markets; Attracting investment into Russia, particularly from the richer countries of the Persian Gulf; Supporting energy prices by coordinating policies with the principal oil and gas producers in the Gulf" (2021, p. 66). Russia seeks to develop cooperation with the Gulf countries not only economically but also in the political and military domains. In the current edition of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, published in 2016, strategic dialogue with the GCC is listed among its priorities (Surkov, 2021, p. 89).

Regarding the political domain, relations between Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Russia are determined by pragmatism. In the geopolitical sphere, according to Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov, Russia's leadership looks at the Gulf region through the lens of Moscow's goal of confronting the West. In order to take advantage of the Middle Eastern issues to shape its relations with the West, Russia has to maintain its position as an influential player in the Gulf region, meaning Moscow needs to demonstrate its importance to the regional actors. Under these circumstances, Russia's active attempts to maintain good ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the OPEC+ aim to make the Gulf states keep communication channels open with Moscow (Issaev & Kozhanov, 2021, p. 889). In this context, relations between the three Arab Gulf states in question, Saudi Arabia in particular, and Russia, are determined by the relationships between them and the U.S. As the U.S.-Saudi cooperation deteriorated after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia attempted to diversify the Kingdom's foreign policy by strengthening ties with Russia in order to reduce dependence on the U.S. Subsequently, the stance of Saudi Arabia and Russia against the Iraq war has improved relations between the two countries as for Saudi Arabia, the main reason why it was against the war was its concerns about Iran's rising influence in the region while Russia's concern was the U.S.' increasing military presence that means

narrowing the maneuver for Russia in the region. These relationships, as Ulrichsen emphasized, took on regional geopolitical ramifications in 2009–2010, with Saudi Arabia and Russia negotiating the potential purchase of a \$4 billion air defense missile system, partly to persuade Moscow not to move forward with the transfer of such cutting-edge weapons to Iran (2015, p. 73).

Nevertheless, despite Saudi Arabia and the UAE attempting to convince Moscow to cool down its relations with Iran, the position of the Russian leadership was clear that these ties are not negotiable since collaboration between Russia and Iran goes beyond the Persian Gulf region. For example, regional concerns include oil and security in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea (Issaev & Kozhanov, 2021, p. 889). What is more, Russia is not less willing than Iran to keep this relationship as Moscow still remembers the effective role of Iran in stopping the civil war in Tajikistan in the mid-1990s. Similarly, Tehran's stance during Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 was construed by the Kremlin as *de facto* pro-Russian. Finally, in 2018, the adoption of a Moscow-backed framework agreement on the legal status of the Caspian Sea would have been considerably more difficult without Iranian consent (Grajewski, 2020). Hence, it is obvious that any improvement in relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia won't have much of an influence on Russia's collaboration with Iran.

When it comes to the economic domain, the three Arab Gulf states provide ground for Russia's economic goal in the region in terms of two dimensions: first, Moscow considers the Gulf states as an important source of investment and as a market for its industries such as arms manufacturing, nuclear sector, oil, and gas. Second, the state budget's dependency on hydrocarbon exports and the Kremlin's concerns regarding a possible drop in oil prices below USD 40 per barrel enforces Russia to cooperate with OPEC and Saudi Arabia (Kozhanov, 2021, p. 2).

As "in the past decade the need for close cooperation with Gulf energy producers on production and pricing has become increasingly evident in Moscow" (Parmeter, 2021, p. 29), Russian energy companies have had a growing influence on policy decisions. The interests of hydrocarbon producers play a part in motivating the Kremlin to balance between key forces in the Persian Gulf, ensuring that Russia is not "putting all its eggs into one basket" (Kozhanov, 2021, p. 4). To this extent, Russia started to expand its economic linkages with the Gulf states and reinforced its ties to giant gas producers such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The visit of Russia's President Vladimir Putin to Saudi Arabia and Qatar in February 2007, which was the first visit since the end of the Cold War that restored diplomatic relations, can be assessed within this context. The purpose of the visit was to increase joint investment opportuni-

ties and cooperation with energy-producing countries (Ulrichsen, 2015, p. 73).

Since 60% of Russia's export is made of oil and gas, Moscow puts a significant effort into close cooperation with the Gulf countries to keep prices stable for these commodities. Thus, Russian companies are interested in joint production projects regarding oil and gas. For example, during his visit to the UAE in October 2019, Russia's President Putin expressed his satisfaction with the cooperation between Gazprom Neft and Mubadala Petroleum, which is developing fields in Russia. Additionally, he mentioned that Lukoil had started to work with the UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and had received the prerogative for the development of offshore oil and gas in the UAE (Surkov, 2021, p. 91).

As for the military domain, Russia's interest in the Persian Gulf can be explained through the security features of the region. Russia has released its "Concept of Collective Security in the Persian Gulf" since, as Kozhanov indicates, Moscow believes that a new security system will inevitably emerge in the Gulf region. Considering Russia's ambitions regarding playing a significant role in the region, Moscow does not want to be deprived of participation in this new security system. Therefore, in order to be able to use the security issues in the Persian Gulf region in its competition with the U.S., Moscow has to maintain its position as an influential external player in the region (Kozhanov, 2021, p. 8). In this context, Russia makes intensive efforts to enter the regional arms market. The UAE is Russia's major customer currently. In addition to that, an agreement on technical and military cooperation was signed between Qatar and Russia. Similarly, Russia is preparing to sign an agreement on military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is a potential partner for expanding the defense industry and arms supply collaboration. For instance, an agreement on the joint production of small-arms ammunition and AK-103 automatic rifles was signed in February 2022. Furthermore, the offer of Russian weapons, such as S-400E missile systems, anti-tank missiles, and TOS1-A thermobaric missile launchers, is still being discussed (Rodkiewicz & Żochowski, 2021).

Understanding the stance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar on Russia's invasion of Ukraine

In order to understand the stance of the three states in question towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is necessary to look at their reaction first. As Cafi-ero points out, considering changing roles of the U.S. and Russia in Gulf politics, so as to maintain geopolitical balance amid conflicts between the West

and Russia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia decided not to take a clear stance on the war in Ukraine (Cafiero, 2022). Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, therefore, have supported a political solution in Ukraine, and they expressed concern about a humanitarian crisis without condemning the Russian military operation (Priya, 2022). The Saudi monarchy affirmed its support for the international endeavor to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine through dialogue and diplomacy, and Saudi Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman declared that Saudi Arabia would support any measure for de-escalation of the situation (*Saudi Crown Prince Affirms*, 2022).

In terms of energy, it is worth noting that “Saudi Arabia is benefitting from higher oil prices, with dividends from state-owned Saudi Aramco helping generate a \$15 billion national budget surplus in the first three months of 2022 and creating fiscal options for Saudi leaders” (Blanchard et al., 2022). Having invested heavily, through OPEC, in its partnership with Russia, it is in Riyadh’s favor to avoid antagonizing the Kremlin. It is also about making sure that it still has good connections to Moscow once the Ukraine war ends (Cafiero, 2022). Therefore, contrary to the West, Saudi Arabia’s response to the invasion has been seen as neutral and soft on Russia. For instance, despite the Biden administration’s request for increasing oil production in the wake of rising oil prices – as it rose above US\$ 130 per barrel – Riyadh affirmed its commitment to the balance of the oil market and refused to pump more oil (Wang, 2022).

As for the UAE, the Emirates and Russia have improved their economic ties in recent years. “Bilateral trade, increased by 21 percent in 2021. More than 4,000 Russian companies have opened their branches in the UAE and many Emirati companies are keen to invest in transport, infrastructure, and hospitality sectors in Russia” (Rahman, 2021). Therefore, the UAE, in a similar way to Saudi Arabia, intends to show its solidarity with Kyiv without creating a rift between itself and Moscow. For instance, it refrained from voting on the resolution tabled at the United National Security Council (UNSC), whereas it voted in favor of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution against Russia. Lana Nusseibeh, UAE’s Ambassador to the U.N., explained the Emirates’ contradictory vote in UNSC and UNGA as an effort to stop the escalation and help create the conditions for peace in order to effectively address support a diplomatic solution (Nusseibeh, 2022). Having already necessary commercial ground between the UAE and Russia, Abu Dhabi welcomes an influx of Russian capital. For instance, Russian billionaires and entrepreneurs arrived in the UAE in unprecedented numbers in order to save their properties. Property purchases by Russians in Dubai in-

creased by 67% in the first three months of 2022. The influx of Russian citizens bolstered the demand for villas and apartments across the city (Hashmi, 2022). In the same vein, the UAE has been one of the largest importers of wheat from Russia and Ukraine by volume in the region since 2019 (United Nations, 2022).

When it comes to Qatar, it has taken a more out-rightly anti-Russia position. Doha has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and co-sponsored the UNGA resolution demanding Russia to withdraw its military from Ukraine (Qarjouli, 2022). What is more, Qatar is the Gulf's only country that has been overtly critical of the invasion (Priya, 2022). Additionally, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, Qatar's Foreign Minister, addressed the situation in Ukraine before the 49th session of the Human Rights Council on the 28th of February in Geneva. Qatar's top diplomat called for a constructive dialogue to resolve the crisis while stressing Qatar's "respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders." Qatar, however, avoids burning bridges with Moscow due to its developed ties with Russia in the spheres of tourism, investment, and infrastructure. For instance, although Qatar stood up for Ukraine's sovereignty, similar to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it did not join Western powers in financial warfare against Russia (Cafiero, 2022).

As it can be seen from here, the three states in question have reacted differently to the invasion. This can be explained by the diverse security incentives and disincentives the conflict has posed to them. To give an example, Qatar has not been a member of OPEC since 2019 (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, 2018), and it is foremost reliant on the gas market, not the oil one. Since there is a general consent in Europe that Russia's gas export to Europe needs to be replaced by other sources, Qatar seems to be well prepared to increase its global sales and benefit from sanctioning Russia. Furthermore, since the 1995 coup d'état, which brought to power the father of the current emir, Qatar has been conducting more assertive foreign policy, which after the Arab uprisings in 2011, has been less in line with the expectations of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the U.S. As Sean Yom has put it, Qatar's leaders have adopted a new "ideational orientation toward the international system that would emphasize Qatar as a global actor rather than a Gulf or even Arab one and reduce Qatar's vulnerability within the Gulf regional security complex" (Yom, 2018, p. 89). Thus, it would be unrealistic that Qatar will suddenly fully align its foreign policy with the U.S. and risk serious deterioration in its relations with Russia. This is also important in the context of Qatar's relations with China and India (Doha's important econom-

ic partners), as Qatar's elites probably do not want to be seen as simply the executor of the U.S. will in the region.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that currently, the U.S. is an irreplaceable security provider for the Gulf states and their long-standing, well-known ally. In addition, it is the source of modern weaponry and military know-how. Self-sufficiency in military security is a goal that cannot be achieved soon, despite heavy arms spending in recent years. Although Russia and China might be seen as potential alternatives as arms providers, they are not capable of assuming U.S. role due to a lack of financial resources and political influence. Furthermore, as the course of the war has so far made Russia more dependent on Iran in terms of drone supply and know-how in sanctions evasion, it may come at the cost of selling Teheran advanced weapons, including fighter jets. Such a situation, without a doubt, would escalate the security concerns of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which would deepen their reliance on U.S. security assurances. In this context, despite recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and the U.S., such as not increasing the oil production to cover the deficit of global energy needs that resulted from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi avoid more overt cooperation with Russia in order not to distance themselves from Washington.

Conclusions

In this article, the stance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the first year of the full-scale war has been discussed from the perspective of the three states' regional security concerns that led them to diversify their foreign policies. The findings presented in the article have shown that despite living under the umbrella of U.S. security, states in question avoid taking a position overtly against Russia with regard to the full-scale war in Ukraine.

Russia's influence in the Middle East region has been growing. It has delivered the S-300 air defense system to Syria and expanded its permanent naval presence in Tartus as well as its military presence in the North East of Syria, especially in Qamishli. Similarly, it played an active role in Libya. Regarding Yemen, when Houthi's missiles with a 1000 km of range hit the UAE and Saudi Arabia soil, including ARAMCO oil terminals, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sought ways to negotiate with Russia. In this context, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the long-term allies of the U.S. in the Middle East, want to have geopolitical, energy, and security cooperation with Russia. This ap-

proach is an extension of the policies of diversifying the alliances that the Gulf states have been actively pursuing for the last decade.

Therefore, for the U.S., Russia's invasion of Ukraine is part of the global geopolitics. The U.S. expects its allies in the region to join U.S.-led efforts to undermine Russia's ability to wage war. However, the Arab Gulf states see the situation through regional lenses and calculate their responses against the background of their security interdependencies within the Gulf security complex. Their individual security concerns are the primary determinants of their stance towards the war in Ukraine. As these concerns differ, especially for Qatar on the one side and the UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other, their attitudes are also different. Therefore, their policies should not be seen only through the perspective of their bilateral interests, political or economic, but as part of the wider security dynamics in the Gulf region.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Qatar attempt to maintain their relations with Russia while remaining Washington's allies. Any shifts in their cooperation with the U.S. would be very costly, given the current level of reliance on U.S.-made arms and security guarantees. Secondly, although the U.S. may not be willing to protect their regimes at any cost in case of some internal turmoil, such a scenario is not very probable, and they already have the means to protect their autocratic systems themselves, and Russia provides no better offer in this regard. In addition, despite its rising influence in the Middle East, China does not have the capacity and will to provide security guarantees to the Arab Gulf states. Thus, in case of a major escalation with Iran, it is still the U.S. that can step in and help, not Russia, both for political reasons as well as simply because of Russia's limited (and still diminishing) capabilities. Therefore, in the short-term, the stance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE should be rather seen as means of enhancing their bargaining position vis-à-vis the U.S. and compel Washington to take their fears and needs seriously. Qatar's approach reflects its different position and concerns within the Gulf security complex but also aligns with its post-1995 foreign policy conception.

Considering all aspects discussed above, it can be concluded that although various bilateral and global issues also play a role, the stance of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the first year of the full-scale war can be explained best from the perspective of their regional security concerns, applying the framework offered by RSCT. The attitudes of the three Arab states in question reflect their individual and, to some extent, different perspectives on the key regional security threats they have to deal with.

As for the possible future scenarios, it is unlikely that these monarchies will make a significant change in their stance since, as stated above, pursuing

more balanced relations with global powers has been an important feature of their foreign policies for the last decade. Furthermore, considering some détente in the Iran-Arab relations observed recently, they will be even less incentivized to address U.S. expectations. At the same time, it is also improbable that they will risk any serious rift with Washington as it could have a detrimental impact on their long-term security.

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