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THE EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS THE GULF IN A FAST-CHANGING MIDDLE EAST: TIME TO RE-THINK THE EU-GCC RELATIONS FOR A MORE “GEOPOLITICAL” EU?

SUMMARY: 1. Background and context.-2. The unfulfilled potential of the EU-GCC relations.-3. A fast-changing GCC in a fast-changing Middle East.- 4. The path ahead: an opportunity for the EU to strengthen trade and security relations in the Middle East.- 5. Reforming the EU Foreign and Security policy.

1 *Background and context*

Since the establishment of the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf¹ (GCC) in 1981, the European Union – initially in its previous format of European Economic Community (EEC)- has established diplomatic and economic relations with the sub-regional organization of the Arab States of the Gulf. The relations between the two regional organizations predate both the pillars-system based Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), established by the Maastricht Treaty, and the more recent High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policies, established by the Lisbon Treaty. Therefore, the relations between the European continent and the Arabian Peninsula can be certainly defined historical as they pre-exist the institutionalization of the EU foreign and security policy. Furthermore, the EU-GCC relations represent one of the first institutional

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¹ On the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf Institutions, policies and structure, see among others: A. K. ABDULLA, *Gulf Cooperation Council: Nature, Difference and Process*, in M. C. HUDSON (ed.), *Middle-east dilemma, the Politics and Economics of Arab Integration*, New York, 1999, pp. 124-135; R. ALASFOOR, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: its nature and achievements, a political analysis of regional integration of the GCC states 1974- 2004* Lund, 2007; O. R. FABANI, *El Consejo de Cooperacion de Estados Arabes del Golfo*, Madrid, 2012; C. RISI, *Il Consiglio di Cooperazione del Golfo: La CEE del mondo arabo?*, *Riv.dir. Eur.*, 1984, pp. 172- 184; M. LEGRENZI, H. CILJA, *Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East*, New York, 2008; E. MAESTRI, *La regione del Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Sviluppo e sicurezza umana in Arabia*, Milano, 2009; J. KECHICHIAN, R. RAMAZANI, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Records and Analysis*, Charlottesville, 1988; R. YOUNGS, *The Gulf Region in the Global Economy*, Berlin, 2012; P. BOREA, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Institutions, Laws, Policies and External Relations*, London, 2019.

relations based on a “bi-regional” approach engaging the European institutions on a multilateral path. The multilateral approach in the relations between regional organizations constituted, at that time, a pioneering experiment since foreign relations of member states of regional organizations were still primarily based on a traditional state-to-state, bilateral model. However, during the past thirty years, the multilateral approach in conducting EU-GCC relations² has often appeared having a sine wave trend, resulting into ambitious expectations more than realistic goals, not often followed by concrete achievements. The inaugural EU-GCC joint ministerial meeting held in 1985, paved the way for the negotiations and signature of a Cooperation Agreement entered into force in 1989 and it set the ambitious target of the establishment of an EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement. This remains, still to this date, an unachieved goal. Undoubtedly, the relations between the two regional blocs have flourished over the decades, but not as much as expected or, better, the way it was expected. This is due to several factors that have influenced the process over the years. More recently, and particularly in the last fifteen years, numerous domestic, regional, *intra-European*, *intra-GCC* and international factors have impacted the effectiveness of the bi-regional relations and the effectiveness of the EU foreign and security policy towards the Gulf. This is mostly because the EU, despite the centrality of the Gulf on the regional geo-political and geo-economic scenario, has often relegated the GCC out of its list of priorities³. This is also true if one reads this trend through the GCC lenses. The EU has never really been a priority in its external action. This is certainly caused by a lack of internal cohesion, bureaucratic inefficiencies – on both sides- and a privileged relation with the United States that has often offered what the EU as a bloc was never able to offer: a structured security and defense policy toward the Gulf as part of a more wide and strategic approach toward the whole Middle Eastern area. Nevertheless, the rapid changes on the international chessboard as well as the evolution of the regional dynamics in the Middle East, suggest that it is time, now more than ever, to rethink and revamp the EU-GCC relations. And this is not only because of the need of the GCC states to have a major international player as a partner in commercial as well as security relations, but also because it may be the occasion for the EU to reinvigorate its role of geopolitical global actor, as stated recently by the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy⁴. There are quite a few factors that could justify the ambition of reinvigorating a “geopolitical” EU. First and foremost, the EU is in need to define its international role and its “strategic autonomy”. This concept, consisting in the capacity to decide and act autonomously, was affirmed, and set as a goal back in 2013 in the conclusions of the European Council and it has been reaffirmed in the 2016 Global Strategy policy paper. Therefore, it constitutes a goal of the EU itself and a target for the development of its foreign policy since the EU still did not find a clear position within the contemporary geopolitical world. While the rivalry between the U.S. and China has exacerbated over the past decade, other major actors such as Russia, Turkey, and particularly Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, have better positioned themselves and expanded their influence and relevance on

² H. FURTIG, *GCC-EU Political Cooperation: Myth or Reality*, in *Brit. jour. of mid. east. St.*, 2004, pp. 25-39; A. BAABOOD, G. EDWARDS, *Reinforcing ambivalence: the interaction of Gulf States and the European Union*, in (2007), *Eur. for. aff. rev.*, Vol. 12 No.1, 2007, pp. 545-550.

³ A. ABDEL GHAFAR, S. COLOMBO, *EU-GCC Relations at a Crossroads*, in A. ABDEL GHAFAR, S. COLOMBO (eds.), *The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Towards a new path*, Singapore, 2021, pp. 245-248.

⁴ This is in line with the overall approach, at least in intentions, of the European Commission. In late 2019, immediately after being elected President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen announced that she intended to preside over a “geopolitical Commission”.

the international chessboard. One of the tools that the EU foreign policy could employ to enhance its global relevance is to capitalize on the existing network of external relations with states, and particularly with regional organizations finding a way to revamp them. One of these relations is certainly the one with the GCC.

2 *The unfulfilled potential of the EU-GCC relations*

The EU-GCC institutional relations under a bi-regional, multilateral format, date back to 1989, when the then European Economic Community and the Gulf Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf had signed the first Cooperation Agreement. Since then, the two organizations initiated the development of multilateral relations through a bi-regional approach. An institutional and annually scheduled EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting was established, and regular meetings were conducted over the years. This practice was only suspended recently during the COVID-19 pandemic and resumed in 2021 at the margins of the annual UN General Assembly meeting. The Joint Council and Ministerial Meetings platform has been used by the two regional blocs as a venue to discuss and coordinate common initiatives and to set an ongoing and regular dialogue on a series of initiatives, some of which attempted to strengthen the EU-GCC relations over the years. Usually concluded by Co-Chair statements, the Joint Council and Ministerial Meetings have often been labelled as interlocutory and not based on actual decision-making dynamics. However, the platform has taken momentum during the long, and so far, unsuccessful, negotiations for the EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The FTA remains the most ambitious goal of the EU-GCC cooperation of the past three decades, even though it has been often labelled as the less realistic⁵. Negotiations have been conducted over fifteen years and then unilaterally suspended by the GCC side over persistent - and often unjustified - EU concerns of linking economic and commercial negotiations to the broad picture of democratization and human rights policies of the Gulf countries. Also, and much more relevantly than the often-speculative human rights reason, disagreement over export duties on petrochemical products that the European side was unable to address caused a derail of the negotiations. Therefore, the FTA negotiations entered a phase of stalemate due to a multiplicity of factors affecting both negotiating parties. Amongst them, the phenomenon of so-called “Arab springs” and the global financial crisis, as well as the overall situation in the Middle East. The co-chair statement of the 23rd EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting, held in 2013, provides a fair idea of the status of the EU-GCC relations in the aftermath of the first decade of the 21st century. The broader Middle East regional issues discussed at that meeting regarded particularly the Syrian crisis, political reform in Yemen, Iran nuclear development and the Middle East peace process. In reverse, talks related to the FTA did not reach any progress. This was also due to some decisions undertaken by the EU which affected the dialogue on the Free Trade Agreement⁶. First, the European decision related to the exclusion of the GCC countries from the generalized scheme of preferences was perceived by the GCC as an obstacle in the process towards the finalization of an

⁵ N. A. M. EISSA, *The Analysis of EU-GCC Potential Free Trade Area Agreement Through EU-GCC Actual Steps (1995–2012)*, in *Worl. rev. of pol. econ.*, 2014, pp. 333–334.

⁶ M. A. HASHMI, F. AL-EATANI, F. SHAIKH, *Is There A Need For A Free Trade Agreement Between The European Union And Gulf Cooperation Council?*, in *Int. bus. and econ. res. jour.*, 2013, pp. 113–120.

agreement on the FTA. Moreover, new export duties imposed on GCC products introduced in January 2014 appeared to jeopardize the future of the Free Trade Agreement negotiations. In this respect, the GCC Secretary General at the time highlighted the importance of the elimination of any precondition on export duties to revamp negotiations on the FTA. All this was then reflected in the 24th GCC-EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting, held in Qatar on May 2015. At the above-mentioned summit any sort of reference to the Free Trade Agreement and to bi-regional trade improvement disappeared completely. The 2015 meeting and the related Co-Chairs' statement was a very vague document and mostly focused on general political dialogue and common counter-terrorism action. The only reference to trade that was mentioned regarded the general increase of two-way trade exchange flows. On the same note, one year later, the meeting held in 2016 in Brussels followed the same path, stressing the need of common efforts to contrast Da'esh and other terrorist organizations and the common views on the transition process in Yemen. Again, there was no reference to the effective implementation of the FTA project, but the observations related to the trade relations were limited to the figures and statistics related to the bilateral trade exchange. The EU-GCC FTA project seemed to remain at the side of the successive Joint Council and Ministerial meetings that took place until their suspension in 2019 (before resuming recently, after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak). The last few years were certainly characterized by the return to a bilateral approach of individual EU member states with individual GCC member states. There are quite a few factors that have influenced this trend, on both sides. Brexit on the one hand, the internal rift with Qatar within the GCC, domestic transformations, as well as a fast-changing broader geo-political, geo-economic and security picture in the whole Middle East. All these factors have certainly posed new challenges to the EU-GCC relations, but also new opportunities.

3 *A fast-changing GCC in a fast-changing Middle East*

To drive a strategic approach for the EU towards the GCC, there are certainly a few important factors to be considered. These involve the assessment of the recent developments in both the GCC member states and in the wider Middle Eastern area. With reference to the broader Middle East, the US-led liberal international order is emerging as a new approach in the American international relations, and it reverberates its effects in the EU, across Middle East and other international actors. The recent American withdrawal from the Afghanistan field of operations has been considered by many observers a bold move, however it has been the result of a strategy of progressive retrenchment from the Middle East. The recent Abraham Accords signed at the White House between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, are part of the same broader strategic realignment of the US security and defense presence in the area⁷. Even more recently, the Australia- UK- US (AUKUS) strategic plan clearly shows a change in the priority list of American external engagement in the domain of foreign and security policy. Moreover, the western strategy towards Iran and its nuclear enrichment program shall also be underlined as part of these changes. The change in the US Administration determined the end of President Trump's "maximum pressure" approach

⁷ M. ASSEBURG, S. HENKEL, *Normalisation and Realignment in the Middle East: a new, conflict-prone regional order takes shape*, in *Stift. wiss. und pol. -SWP*, Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C45>.

towards Iran in favor of a return to the negotiations for a revised JPCOA supported by the Biden Administration. The US presence in the Gulf is still relevant and the US remains a major player in the regional security with over 40,000 military personnel deployed in the American bases throughout the Gulf. However, from the American point of view, the core of the international security priorities seems to shift eastward towards the far East. This trend has been crystalized in international strategic and security treaties aiming at counterbalancing the Chinese westward influence and expansion. The increased engagement of a much more assertive China in the Middle East through its Belt and Road initiative as well as the changing role of other actors such as Turkey, Iran, but also some GCC major players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are all factors that should lead the EU to a change of its strategic vision towards the Gulf. Not to forget that some of the above-mentioned actors have acquired an increased role in some Mediterranean dynamics, from the Eastern Mediterranean to Libya, that should be of interest and priority of the EU. More recently, the current Russian-Ukraine crisis has demonstrated the relevance of the GCC region, mostly in the domain of energy supply-chain, also in Eastern-European tensions. The interest for the EU Foreign and Security policy, in this respect, is twofold. On the one hand, it could be an occasion for the organization to re-think and revamp its common defense ambitions and present itself as a reliable regional security partner. On the other hand, it could be an opportunity to finally engage in a true integrated foreign policy, since signs of unilateral action by some of its member states have already manifested through increased, recent and unprecedented bilateral relations of some EU member states like Cyprus and Greece with the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia that add on the traditional and consolidated bilateral relations that the Gulf states have with other larger EU member states such as France, Germany and Italy. An additional factor, on the GCC side, must be taken into consideration. As mentioned, the fast-changing Middle East is not the only element to be considered for strategic consideration at the basis of the need of a revised EU foreign and security policy toward the area. The intra-GCC changes are also important to be considered. The member States of the GCC, in terms of domestic development, are not the same of the past decade. The GCC member states have proved to be an extraordinary model in terms of domestic self-reforming processes, economic diversification, governance of global challenges (COVID-19 pandemic for example) and have shown an unprecedented capacity of holding a prominent role in some of the most pressing global affairs. Also, under the terms of the 2021 AI Aula meeting, the GCC seemed to be able to start the process of mending the internal rift with Qatar started in 2017, demonstrating a capacity of resilience of the organization itself. The 2030 national visions that almost all the GCC member states have set up and the plans for domestic development and economic diversification provide the EU with increased trade opportunities that show that the GCC states, starting from Saudi Arabia, are no longer just oil providers but development providers. Not to forget the relevant changes in high-technologically driven sectors such as digital transformation, e-government, fintech, AI, that have characterized the development of most Gulf states in the past decade. This phenomenon of increased development and technological advancement in many sectors is evident in leading big countries like Saudi Arabia, as well as in comparatively smaller economies like Bahrain. It is also worth to notice that some of these national development plans include an unprecedented interest in alternative energy and green-based projects that could fit well in the European strategic agenda for the EU green deal and be of mutual benefit. Both parties can then reconsider, revamp, and give more value to multilateral, “bi-regional” relations aiming at sealing a Free Trade Agreement that could also support wider

common interests for the stability of the region and pave the way for a plan of increased cooperation in the field of regional security as well.

4 *The path ahead: an opportunity for the EU to strengthen trade and security relations in the Middle East?*

On these bases, it appears relevant for a “more geopolitical” EU to pursue the path of a rapprochement to the GCC using a multilateral approach. The EU would certainly benefit from a Free Trade Agreement with the GCC in terms of improvement of the volume of international trade towards the whole Middle Eastern region. Such strategic deal would also benefit both parties since it could pave the way for an increased cooperation in regional security. The GCC could benefit from a reliable actor able to fill the possible gap caused by the American retrench in the area. On the other hand, the EU would certainly acquire a more relevant geopolitical role that could also support the European foreign policy in North Africa and East Mediterranean. The EU is already engaged in maritime security in the Gulf and some European countries, on a bilateral basis, are active supplier of military equipment and technology to some of the GCC member states. The need, on the EU side, is to coordinate, streamline and strategize the existing bilateral relations and wrap them up into a coherent, strategic, and durable bi-regional cooperation with the Gulf states. The two realms of solid trade relations and security could also be complemented by several instruments of soft diplomacy aiming at a closer cooperation in the cultural and educational fields. A valid starting point is represented by the several EU-funded educational and exchange programs such as Erasmus plus and Jean Monnet initiatives that have been recently opened to the GCC based higher educational institutions as non-EU partners. There are a few projects related to these programs specifically that could really pilot a future increment of these kind of partnerships. Again, also in the educational field the action of some European states has privileged the bilateral method rather than a more comprehensive, structured, and strategic multilateral approach. A few foreign branches of reputable European universities have pioneered in this sector, but a lot more could be done in this respect through a multilateral approach. This would also be an opportunity for the GCC itself to observe more closely the European models on students’ mobility and exchange programs and perhaps replicate the programs for intra-GCC mobility and cooperation in higher education and research. It goes without say that a renewed EU interest towards the GCC implies a more clear and more coordinated EU common position on the wider Gulf issues, beyond the institutional relations with the GCC itself. Ambiguity and lack of coherence has often been observed in the EU policies towards GCC and non-GCC states in the Gulf region by individual EU member states operating bilaterally and out of a coordinated multilateral European context.

Again, this would imply a different approach of the European Union in conceiving and implementing its own foreign and security policy under the Office of the High Representative without overlapping different approaches on bilateral relations of individual member states. Overall, it seems the EU needs a strong political will to add the GCC on top of its foreign policy priorities. There is no reasonable motive not to do that since it has a lot to gain and the current phase would allow the EU to fill the gaps left uncovered by the American repositioning in the wider Middle Eastern arena, achieving a much more prominent geopolitical role on the international chessboard as well. Alternatively, other actors may willingly, but not necessarily efficiently or advantageously, reinforce their

presence in the region and consolidate their relations with the GCC providing win-win solutions to boost trade as well as security in the region. Russia and particularly China, already very active in strengthening its presence in Africa, as well as in some of the Gulf States. But also, a post- Brexit Britain could expand its historically solid relations with the GCC in detriment of an indecisive and less proactive EU⁸. If we read the current trends of international relations in the Middle East with the lenses of realism, we can only conclude that there has never been a better moment for the EU to revamp and advance multilateral EU-GCC relations.

5 *Reforming the EU Foreign and Security policy*

However, a new geopolitical EU interacting multilaterally with the GCC as well as, more generally, with other regions and major actors. requires a re-think of the dynamics and the strategy of the EU Foreign and Security Policy as a whole. First and foremost, the EU should capitalize on its own recent policies and move forward strategies based on them. The 2015 review of the European Neighborhood Policy and the 2016 EU Global Strategy Paper both call for a more geopolitical Europe, based on the foreign policy approach of “principled pragmatism”⁹. The 2019 EU Commission strategic outlook on China, another systemic competitor and challenger, but undoubtedly also a cooperation partner in the trade sector, provides the institution with a springboard for a more geopolitical EU towards China. With reference to the foreign policy toward the US, the EU had a quite challenging time under the Trump’s Administration, it is still early to assess the trend with the Biden Administration. However, particularly with the Trump administration, the trans-Atlantic relation brought in a more pressing interest for the EU to work on its foreign and security policy and particularly on its defense policies. The recently developed “Strategic Compass” intends to provide a platform for joint threat analysis and strategic goals for military strategic cooperation¹⁰. Developing common strategic and defense strategies is of vital importance for a geopolitical EU and this area will be of critical interest for a geopolitical EU that wishes to have a role in different challenging areas of the globe. Russia and eastern Europe is certainly one of them. As the most recent Russian-Ukrainian tensions demonstrate, the EU is in desperate need of a coordinated strategic foreign and defense approach to act as a major multilateral player without falling in the inevitable trap of following the initiative of other major players or, worst, show that European member states play individually and often with different positions. This is also true when dealing North- Africa, Middle East, and the Arabian Gulf region. A “more geopolitical” EU will then need to take clear geopolitical stances and establish a single EU foreign and security policy. This necessarily implies reforming the decision-making mechanisms that are currently causing a lack of agility and responsiveness. This would certainly imply that EU foreign policy decisions should be taken by qualified

⁸ S. RAMANI, EU–Gulf Relations in Post-Brexit Environment, in G. EDWARDS, A. BAABOOD, D. GALEEVA (eds), *Post-Brexit Europe and UK. Policy challenges towards Iran and the GCC States*, Singapore, 2022, pp. 69-101; C. LONS, *Le Royaume-Uni dans le Golfe: quel avenir après le Brexit ?* in *Maghreb - Machrek*, 2019, pp. 63-75.

⁹ D. SCHWARZER, *Europe’s Geopolitical Moment*, in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 1/2021, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europes-geopolitical-moment>.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

majority instead of unanimity and an increased level of coordination between the member states to reach common strategic decisions.

However, this reforming path should necessarily re-address the legal provisions establishing the European Foreign and Security Policy, its institutions, their functions, and the overall decision-making process. A legal reform of the normative framework of the Union is needed. This is because the transition from the pillar system to the Common Foreign and Security Policy did not allow agility and responsiveness starting from its legal stipulations in the articles of the Lisbon Treaty. It is, therefore, certainly worth to draw some considerations on the legal nature of the European Foreign and Security Policy as outlined by the Lisbon Treaty.

First, unanimity in terms of decision-making maintains a prevailing role. Derogations from the unanimity are very limited and clearly prescribed under Article 31(2) TEU. Even though the Lisbon Treaty has introduced two additional derogations to unanimity in favor of qualified majority under Article 31(3), unanimity still dominates the decision-making process in the domain of the EU Foreign and Security Policy. Last, but not least, under Article 31(4) derogations do not apply to decisions involving the military and defense domain.

Moreover, the domain of Foreign and Security Policy remains out of the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice even after the Lisbon Treaty. The provisions of Article 24(1) TEU which introduce two exceptions regarding the compliance with Article 40 TEU and the review of measures Foreign and Security Policy decisions under Article 275(2)¹¹ TFUE do not in reality modify the exclusion of the Foreign and Security Policy from the Court's jurisdiction. All this suggests, as observed by part of the literature on the topic, that the Lisbon Treaty abolished the pillar-based structure only in name¹².

Another aspect that is worth to focus on is the institutional structural change operated by the Lisbon Treaty. The treaty has established the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. To ensure the consistency of that policy, it was decided that the post should have two institutional affiliations: Vice President of the Commission and chair of the Foreign Affairs Council. A duplicity that connects the supranational and intergovernmental facets of the European Union's institutional structure. However, the treaty is quite vague about the role of the High Representative in the part in which in Article 18(4) TEU it is not explicitly mentioned in which areas of the Union's Foreign Affairs the High Representative has a role of supervision and how the role should interact with other EU institutions. Furthermore, the duplicity of the role does not help in terms of institutional effectiveness of the High Representative position. Lastly, the role of High Representative and its function of external representation, coexists with the role assigned to the President of the Council by Article 15(6) TEU. Not to mention the role assigned to the President of the Commission that has also a function of external representation of the Union. All this suggests that the Treaty did not assign the international representation to only one actor, and this contributed to the uncertainty in deploying effective foreign policies. From this brief and non-exhaustive analysis of some of the provisions of the Treaty it follows the fact that the Treaty does not establish a legal system capable to ensure the effectiveness, coherence of the EU external action and the overall effectiveness of the EU Foreign and Security Policy. A

¹¹ This involves decisions regarding restrictive measures against natural or legal persons.

¹² P. KOUTRAKOS, *The European Union's common foreign and security policy after Lisbon*, in D. ASHIAGABOR, N. COUNTOURIS, I. LIANOS, (eds.), *The European Union after the Treaty of Lisbon*, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 185-209.

system that is in evident need of a legal reform if the EU truly wants to equip its Foreign and Security Policy with agility and responsiveness.

Agility and responsiveness are two key factors also in terms of strategic EU-GCC relations. A number of very recent events with the GCC States at the epicenter are considerably important. At the outset of this year 2022, a delegation of GCC States foreign Ministers, accompanied by the GCC Secretary General traveled to China for what has been described as an unprecedented visit¹³ to strengthen China- Gulf economic relations and revamp the China-GCC FTA negotiations¹⁴. Alongside the recent Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, the Chinese President met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and the Qatari Amir. Even more recently, in February 2022, the Turkish President's visit to Abu Dhabi signaled the beginning of a process of rapprochement after a decade of tension and the beginning of a mutual interest to explore the possibility of a bilateral investment and trade-based relationship that could also reverberate on other GCC markets¹⁵. Russia, through its diplomats, has also showed a renewed interest in consolidating its relations with some of the Gulf countries. Such circumstances, in addition to the considerations on the broader Middle Eastern scenario and the generalized American retrenchment from the region discussed above, makes quite evident that the Gulf, and particularly its major players Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is nowadays absolutely relevant, geopolitically and geoeconomically. Revamping its trade relations and its overall foreign policy in the area could also help the EU to reposition itself on the international chessboard as an autonomous global actor. Would this be enough for a wake-up call for the EU to re-think its relations with the GCC?

¹³ F. SALESIO SCHIAVI, M. SERRA, *The Gulf and China: a Broadening Partnership?*, in ISPI Med, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/gulf-and-china-broadening-partnership-32872>.

¹⁴ J. FULTON, *Routledge Handbook on China- Middle East Relations*, New York, 2022.

¹⁵ H. IBISH, *Erdogan visit underscores UAE-Turkey rapprochement is at the heart of regional de-escalation*, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2022, <https://agsiw.org/erdogan-visit-underscores-uae-turkey-rapprochement-is-at-the-heart-of-regional-de-escalation/>.