



Policy Brief

Containing Escalation: Why Strategic Restraint Has Become the Gulf's New Regional Doctrine

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The GCC strategic restraint – a rational calculation

The security situation in the Middle East has rapidly deteriorated since 7 October 2023. What began as the war in Gaza gradually expanded into a wider regional escalation, as hostilities extended beyond Gaza to involve Lebanon, Yemen, and later direct military exchanges between Israel and Iran. On February 28, 2026, Israel and the United States launched military operations in Iran, killing the Iranian [Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei](#), prompting Iran to retaliate with a combination of ballistic missiles and armed drones, extending strikes beyond Israel to targets across the Gulf. The deteriorating international situation exacerbated the security dilemma for the GCC. On the one hand, the [2001 GCC Joint Defence Agreement](#) obliges the member states to promptly assist a neighbor in cases of aggression or in case of threats of aggression, and even use military forces to restore regional peace and security. This cooperative logic has previously been reflected in Peninsula Shield coordination and in collective efforts to strengthen regional air-defence preparedness during moments of heightened regional tension. On the other hand, the GCC leaders thus far have avoided escalatory language and have not signaled that they are planning a military response. In fact, throughout the crisis, the GCC leaders have clearly stated that they will respect the principles of international law and will seek a resolution of the conflict through strategic diplomacy, calling for dialogue between the belligerent parties and expressing their commitment towards reducing the civilian casualties in the conflict.

Strategic restraint seems to be informing the Gulf regional security doctrine. The United Arab Emirates, for example, [has openly stated that the US bases in the country will not be used to attack Iran](#), even though the country is targeted by Iranian drones. The other GCC members are also unwilling to support the American-Israeli campaign in Iran, despite the high economic and military

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cost of the conflict they presently incur. This restraint should not be interpreted as evidence of neutrality and passivity; the GCC countries have accumulated vast defense and military resources in the past few years, ready to be employed in both offensive and defensive campaigns. Nor are Gulf states unfamiliar with the use of force when they perceive strategic necessity, as the Gulf militaries have attained significant combat experience in the military campaigns in Yemen in particular over the past decade. The strategic restraint reflects deliberate structured strategic behavior because regional policymakers increasingly view diplomatic de-escalation as more effective than direct military entanglement in preserving strategic autonomy and a greater potential for restoring regional security than the hardline approach that is currently pursued.

The security considerations underpinning the GCC strategic restraint doctrine

Strategic restraint remains one of the few viable strategic options despite possessing significant military capabilities, because a wider conflict would impose costs disproportionate to their strategic priorities. The war in the Middle East directly threatens the security of the maritime routes, as the [traffic passing through the Strait of Hormuz](#) has fallen by nearly 90% and the few ships that pass through it face the risk of being targeted by hostile actors. In such circumstances, strategic restraint is more necessary than ever since the longer the war continues, the greater the political, economic and security costs those countries are likely to face will be. Continued escalation would require sustained defensive readiness and prolonged allocation of interception capacities. At the same time, the growing reliance on drone warfare adds a different layer of defensive pressure, as drones are comparatively less costly to manufacture and deploy than missile interception systems, while lower-altitude flight paths can complicate detection and interception over time.

Maintaining an uninterrupted supply of petroleum products is a key priority for the GCC due to their reliance on oil revenues to address budgetary shortfalls and support economic growth. In the past week, armed actors aligned with Iran have targeted Gulf energy infrastructure, attacking the GCC oil and gas refineries, pipelines and shipping terminals, prompting a cut in oil and [gas production](#). Thus far, the physical damage to the energy infrastructure remains limited; however, it is highly likely that hostile actors would expand their activities if military retaliation becomes part of the regional response. The doctrine of strategic restraint is not only a suitable approach to prevent further damage to GCC energy infrastructure, but a strategically sustainable response in

an increasingly volatile world. Regional leaders rightfully calculate that the more restrained they are in their military activities, the more likely they will maintain the moral high ground during the conflict. Targeting civilian spaces and energy infrastructure of countries that have not perpetrated an act of aggression, such as those of the Gulf Cooperation Council, raises serious legal and political concerns under international law. Restraint is a viable strategy that not only ensures that an aggressor would be condemned at the international level. It also encourages the aggressor to reconsider their military strategy as attacking civilian spaces without a legitimate cause undermines the Iranian international strategy, which seeks to promote the message that Iran, per se, is a victim of external military escalation.

The conflict in the Middle East is already spilling over as missiles have hit targets in Turkey and Cyprus, and the European Union members have already sent warships to the Mediterranean to prevent further escalation that could threaten [European security and maritime routes](#). The GCC leaders have already recognised that conflicts in the Middle East can hardly be won through military means; a military intervention merely emboldens the hardline leaders abroad and provides legitimacy to their insurgency struggles and violent rhetoric, prompting further military actions. The present conflict in the Middle East is hardly an exception, as the death of Ali Khamenei is unlikely to lead to regime change in Iran, but merely prompt further retaliatory strikes to the Gulf territories and beyond. Strategic restraint is a doctrine that clearly shows the GCC's ambition to prevent direct entanglement in a potential Iranian-Israeli-US conflict and its desire to shield the Gulf from deeper military escalation. Preserving the unity among the alliance members in these volatile times remains a strategic necessity, even though the costs of the conflict are not equally shared by them.

The economic considerations underpinning the GCC strategic restraint strategy

The strategic restraint doctrine seeks to achieve economic objectives as well. A prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz would lead to an exponential rise in the oil price in the international markets, leading to inflationary pressure and market volatility both at regional and international level. Such an outcome does not align with the GCC strategic calculation. Strategic restraint does not determine maritime outcomes on its own, but it helps avoid adding a further regional trigger that could intensify economic disruption. Stability in international financial and energy

markets is a necessary prerequisite for achieving national transformation strategies, such as Qatar National Vision 2030.

An escalation of the war in the Middle East also threatens the investment climate, the market plans and long-term diversification strategies in the Gulf. Arab States aim to position themselves as innovative hubs and attract investors and talent from all over the globe to do business and work in the Gulf. The ambitions to be a new innovation frontier are undermined by the war, as the conflict has led to an exodus of talent and key foreign workforce. The longer the war continues, the less likely it is that strategic workers and investors will return to the Gulf.

Furthermore, the stock markets are already under pressure as investors seek to divest themselves from the risky assets, undermining financial stability. The Qatari QE index lost 5% of its value on March 2, and the downward trend is unlikely to be reversed as long as the [war continues](#). Potential participation of the GCC in the Israel-Iranian conflict is going to further reinforce investor caution and delay capital commitments across regional markets. The doctrine of strategic restraint supports the GCC development ambitions as it reflects a broader strategic preference for stability, policy continuity, and calibrated state decision-making to enter a prolonged conflict whose strategic costs would likely outweigh its expected gains. Moreover, by avoiding deeper military entanglement in the conflict, the smaller countries in the Gulf preserve their diplomatic space to act as credible mediators and use their already developed mediatory expertise to seek a diplomatic solution to a conflict whose long-term costs would likely exceed any immediate strategic gain for all parties involved.

The role of Oman and Qatar in supporting the conflict resolution process

The present instability in the Middle East provides strategic opportunities to both Oman and Qatar (two actors in the Gulf that have traditionally maintained close ties to Iran) to leverage their diplomatic capital and achieve progress in conflict resolution through mediation. For more than three decades, Qatar and Oman pursued strategic hedging as a foreign policy strategy that seeks to maintain positive relations with both Tehran and Washington. Oman has already been successful in brokering a compromise between Washington and Tehran as Omani diplomats supported the backdoor diplomacy that led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2013.

Qatar is also a well-known broker of intractable disputes in the wider Middle East, having been able to support the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan and its agreement with the Taliban.

Qatar and Oman remained diplomatically engaged regional actors throughout the crisis. Both continue to build diplomatic channels, supporting communication efforts, despite direct pressure on Omani energy infrastructure during the escalation, and actively seeking mediation opportunities intended to preserve the dialogue between Washington and Tehran and prevent further escalation of the conflict. During the most recent escalation, Doha has sought to contain the crisis by advocating restraint and establishing indirect diplomatic channels between the warring parties. Notably, even following Iran's attack on the Al-Udeid airbase in June, Qatar remained the only GCC state to dispatch its foreign minister to Tehran for high-level consultations. This decision illustrates Doha's willingness to preserve communication with all parties [even when faced with security threats](#).

However, the recent military developments have narrowed the diplomatic space for negotiations and weakened the mediation pathways. The Iranian leadership is unlikely to accept a diplomatic solution after the death of Ali Khamenei. Despite those challenges, neither Oman nor Qatar has embraced confrontational rhetoric even though they both disapprove of the American operation and the Iranian military response. They continue to embrace the doctrine of strategic restraint, advocating for a diplomatic solution even though they face direct security and economic threats and even though past diplomatic plans for a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Iran and the United States were abandoned. Strategic restraint continues to shape Gulf diplomacy because regional leaders calculate that limiting further escalation remains the most practical way to reduce additional human, economic, and security costs, despite their efforts to facilitate dialogue between opposing parties having repeatedly been rejected. Restraint is not only a response to danger; it is also intended to prevent a wider deterioration that would impose heavier long-term costs on regional societies and state institutions.

Small state diplomacy as a viable solution to the current Middle East conflict

The diplomatic role of the smaller Gulf states is often underestimated in high-stakes international disputes since it is perceived that smaller mediators do not have the diplomatic capacity and sufficient leverage over the parties to support a long-lasting resolution of the conflict. Such a

critique is valid; however, it is not applicable to the smaller members of the alliance. The GCC countries, despite their small size, are emerging diplomatic powerhouses, capable of resolving not only intractable disputes but also disputes between global and regional superpowers. However, for any mediatory strategy to be successful, the mediator must be a neutral party to the dispute so that both parties perceive that the mediator would not be prejudicial to their interests. This is why strategic restraint is important as a strategy for the GCC countries, as it signals to the disputants that the mediators are interested in peaceful resolution of the dispute and are willing to bear the diplomatic burden to have the dispute resolved in a neutral manner, even if they have to bear high economic and security costs. Strategic restraint is a strategy that seeks to preserve diplomatic capital, which is pivotal for the GCC bid to maintain credibility as mediators between competing superpowers. For the smaller countries in the Gulf, sustaining open channels of communication and dialogue constitutes a strategic asset in itself, enabling them to influence regional developments without resorting to direct confrontation.

In other words, the Gulf states are not avoiding military confrontation because they must calculate the consequences of escalation in a region where Iran remains an immediate neighboring power; rather, they are deliberately adopting restraint as a strategic choice aimed at preserving diplomatic space and safeguarding regional security.

In this sense, restraint is no longer a temporary response to crisis; it is increasingly emerging as a Gulf method for preserving strategic autonomy under regional uncertainty.