



Pragmatic Economic Engagement between China and Saudi Arabia: Power, Interests, and the Sustainable Development

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Abstract: In recent years, China–GCC relations have strengthened significantly, particularly in the economic domain, with growing trade and investment ties indicating a shift toward more structured and institutionalized partnerships. China has established itself as one of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) most significant trading partners, not only through its substantial energy imports but also via its expanding investments across critical sectors, including infrastructure, advanced technology, and renewable energy. This relationship is underpinned by pragmatic considerations, as GCC states endeavor to diversify their external partnerships and mitigate their long-standing reliance on Western allies. At the same time, China views the Gulf region as a reliable energy source and a promising market for investments, especially within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, this cooperative trajectory is not without potential challenges. Chief among them is the enduring alignment of Gulf states with traditional alliances—most notably their strategic relationship with the United States, which continues to serve as the primary security umbrella for the region. Such overlapping alliances raise serious questions about the sustainability of China–GCC relations within this complex web of geopolitical balances, particularly if great power interests come into conflict or external pressures emerge that could disrupt the cooperative momentum. Against this backdrop, the central question this paper addresses is whether political and economic pragmatism can provide a sufficient foundation for the long-term sustainability of China–Gulf relations amid an increasingly uncertain and polarized international environment. To answer this question, the study adopts pragmatist theory as a conceptual framework to interpret the foreign behavior of states beyond ideological commitments, and relies on in-depth interviews method to examine the features of this relationship.

Keywords: Sino-gulf, pragmatism, sustainability, GCC

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a rapid transformation from the unipolarity that characterized the post–Cold War era—dominated by the United States—into a multipolar order where major powers such as China, Russia, and the

European Union increasingly assert their influence. This transformation is not limited to the military redistribution of power; it also encompasses economic, technological, and cultural dimensions. Scholars note that China, in particular, has emerged as a key actor in reshaping the global order through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which some have described as a mechanism for redistributing global centers of influence (Ikenberry, 2018; Callahan, 2016). Walt (2018) argues that this multipolarity simultaneously enhances opportunities for both competition and cooperation, compelling medium and small states to reassess their foreign policies in order to secure their national interests within an increasingly complex international environment.

Amid the accelerating shift toward a multipolar world, Gulf states are working to reshape their strategic priorities in line with their evolving economic and security needs, particularly given the growing necessity to diversify sources of income and reduce dependence on traditional powers. Within this context, adaptation to China's rise as a global economic force has taken the form of a pragmatic economic exchange model, grounded in mutual interests and free from ideological commitments or rigid political alliances. This emerging model raises important questions about the potential sustainability of such a relationship on pragmatic foundations—especially in an international environment characterized by volatility and intensifying competition among major powers.

Over the past decade, the Gulf Arab states—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—have undergone a strategic shift in their economic and political priorities. This shift includes a gradual reduction in their exclusive reliance on the United States and an increased emphasis on economic diversification, technological development, and renewable energy. National development strategies such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Centennial 2071 reflect a clear orientation toward building knowledge-based and sustainable economies. Consequently, Gulf states are actively seeking diversified partnerships, particularly in Asia (Ulrichsen, 2020; Gray, 2019). Moreover, geopolitical challenges such as the declining global dependence on oil and the growing risks associated with climate change are driving these states to pursue new alliances that align more closely with their evolving national interests (Krane, 2021; Gause, 2017).

Within this broader context of diversification and recalibrated foreign policy goals, engagement with China has emerged as a central component of Gulf strategy, exemplifying a pragmatic shift toward partnerships grounded in economic interests rather than ideological alignment. The Gulf states have adopted a pragmatic approach in their engagement with China, viewing it as a vital economic partner rather than a comprehensive alternative to the United States. Instead, China is perceived as a strategic complement. Bilateral trade between the two sides has grown significantly, reaching tens of billions of dollars annually, with cooperation expanding in infrastructure, technology, and energy sectors. As noted by Scobell and Nader (2016), China relies on the Gulf as a stable and reliable source of energy, while the Gulf states view China as a promising market for investment and technological collaboration. According to Fulton (2019) and Zhao (2020), this relationship remains governed by mutual interests rather than ideological alignment, highlighting the pragmatic flexibility that defines their interaction.

The relationship between China and the Gulf states appears poised to continue; however, its long-term sustainability depends on the ability of both parties to maintain a delicate balance among their economic, political, and security interests. Despite growing economic cooperation, the Gulf states remain reliant on the U.S. security umbrella, which necessitates caution in deepening ties with China, particularly in sensitive areas. Scholars such as Alterman (2020) and Wuthnow (2021) emphasize that sustaining this relationship requires careful management of political divergences, especially on issues such as governance, human rights, and the intensifying technological rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Additionally, regional crises and the fluidity of the international order may generate both opportunities and challenges, reinforcing pragmatism as a necessary strategic posture rather than a mere option.

Despite extensive scholarship on China-GCC relations, the pragmatic underpinnings of this engagement remain underexplored, thereby revealing a critical gap in the existing literature. This paper seeks to examine the sustainability of relations between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from a pragmatic perspective, in light of the accelerating transformations in the international system and the emergence of a multipolar global order characterized by overlapping strategic and economic interests among major powers. This shift reflects a reconfiguration of global geopolitical balances, where international relations are no longer governed by rigid ideological binaries, but are increasingly shaped by flexible, interest-driven cooperation. Within this context, Sino-Gulf relations emerge as a prominent example of pragmatic engagement based on mutual interests, rather than ideological or comprehensive strategic alliances. The importance of this type of relationship is further underscored by the developmental transitions underway on both sides: China, as an ascending economic power, seeks to expand its influence and secure energy supplies, while the Gulf states aim to diversify their economies and broaden their partnerships—particularly toward the East—away from traditional Western dependency. This study employs pragmatism as a conceptual framework for understanding state behavior, and adopts in-depth interviews methodology to explore the dimensions of this relationship within a shifting global context, with a focus on the economic, political, and security interactions that shape its current dynamics and future trajectories.

Amidst contemporary geopolitical transformations, international relations are increasingly shaped by pragmatic considerations, as nation-states prioritize the maximization of economic and security interests. Sino-Gulf relations epitomize this trend, marked by extensive trade and investment cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and technology sectors. These partnerships have been instrumental in advancing diversification strategies within the Gulf while enabling China to secure vital access to regional markets and energy supplies. At the same time, they highlight a broader shift away from rigid ideological alignments toward flexible, interest-based collaboration that reflects the logic of multipolarity in today's international system.

Nevertheless, a critical question arises: Can such pragmatically driven partnerships facilitate authentic and sustainable development that delivers tangible benefits to local populations? While these collaborations undoubtedly

present significant opportunities for economic growth, they remain constrained by structural factors, including entrenched policy alliances, dependency on hydrocarbon revenues, and competing geopolitical alignments that exert pressure on both sides. Moreover, the durability of pragmatism will depend on the ability of these states to institutionalize cooperation beyond transactional exchanges, embedding mechanisms of accountability, local capacity-building, and equitable distribution of benefits. Consequently, it is imperative to examine the extent to which pragmatic engagement can insulate these relations from external pressures and ensure their long-term viability as a genuine pathway to sustainable development.

Economic Pragmatism Theory, adapted from Classical Pragmatism (especially the works of Charles Peirce and John Dewey), emphasizes practical outcomes and flexible, interest-based partnerships rather than rigid ideological commitments. This approach is particularly relevant in analyzing relationships such as those between China and the Gulf states. The Key points in this theory are the following points:

1. Practical Outcomes: The focus is on tangible benefits and results, valuing economic gains over theoretical or ideological agreements.
2. Flexible Partnerships: Relationships are characterized by adaptability and pragmatism, allowing for shifts based on mutual interests rather than strict political alignment.
3. Interest-Based Deals: Economic agreements, such as energy-for-infrastructure exchanges, highlight how both parties prioritize mutual benefits, facilitating cooperation despite differing political systems.

Applications

1. Mutual Economic Gains: China and Gulf countries often engage in deals that prioritize economic benefits. For instance, energy supplies can be traded for investment in infrastructure, showcasing a practical approach to diplomacy.
2. Adaptive Strategies: As global market conditions change (e.g., fluctuating oil demand or adjustments in initiatives like the Belt and Road), both sides modify their strategies to maintain advantageous positions, demonstrating responsiveness to economic realities.

In recent years, a new model in international relations has emerged, coinciding with the rise of China as an influential global power, reshaping the rules of political and economic balances on the international stage. This model is rooted in the idea of multipolarity, which has begun to generate a form of international relations that is less tied to traditional military alliances and more focused on economic interests and pragmatic cooperation. Unlike the Cold War era, which was characterized by rigid bipolar polarization, this transformation is marked by flexibility, allowing medium and smaller states to adopt multi-directional strategies. These strategies enable them to maximize economic gains with competing major powers without fully integrating into a single political or security bloc.

However, the specificity of the Gulf states presents a clear dilemma within this context, as they continue to rely primarily on the United States as the principal guarantor of security and stability in the region, while simultaneously expanding their unprecedented economic cooperation with China. This duality reflects a

strategy of “pragmatic balance” that has become a defining feature of contemporary Gulf policies. For instance, Sino-Gulf relations have witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade; the volume of trade between the two sides increased from approximately 155 billion Saudi riyals in 2016 to around 403 billion riyals in 2024. This reflects not only the deepening of economic interdependence but also the widening scope of cooperation, spanning energy, infrastructure, advanced technology, and mutual investments. Such a trend underscores the Gulf states’ commitment to diversifying their economic partnerships, while at the same time acknowledging the shifting dynamics of the international system and seeking to benefit from China’s rise without undermining their long-standing security alliance with the United States. In this frame, the following issues will be discussed:

Sustaining pragmatically balanced relations in the Gulf region requires navigating a delicate equilibrium between economic diversification goals and enduring security dependencies. While Gulf states have significantly deepened their cooperation with China in trade, energy, infrastructure, and technology, they continue to rely on the United States as their primary security guarantor. This dual alignment illustrates a pragmatic strategy that prioritizes economic growth and modernization while maintaining stability through established defense partnerships. The challenge, however, lies in managing the tensions that may arise if strategic competition between Washington and Beijing intensifies, compelling Gulf states to carefully calibrate their engagement to preserve both economic benefits and political security.

For Saudi Arabia, sustaining a pragmatically balanced relationship is especially significant within the framework of Vision 2030, which seeks to reduce reliance on oil, expand renewable energy, and attract foreign investment. The Kingdom views China as a vital economic partner—particularly in energy exports, infrastructure development, and emerging technologies—while still recognizing the centrality of its long-standing security partnership with the United States. Riyadh’s strategy is therefore one of pragmatic duality: leveraging China’s role in economic transformation while avoiding actions that might jeopardize its strategic alliance with Washington. The long-term sustainability of this balance depends on Saudi Arabia’s ability to institutionalize economic cooperation with China in ways that complement, rather than contradict, its geopolitical and security commitments.

In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have increasingly prioritized pragmatism over rigid alliances in shaping their foreign and economic policies. Rather than binding themselves exclusively to a single global power, these states have sought to diversify their partnerships in pursuit of economic modernization, technological advancement, and energy transition. This pragmatic orientation reflects an awareness of the shifting international order, where multipolarity and great-power competition demand flexibility rather than ideological alignment. By maintaining cooperative ties with both China and the United States—leveraging the former for trade and investment opportunities while relying on the latter for security guarantees—GCC countries illustrate a strategic balancing act. Such an approach not only maximizes economic benefits but also

allows them to safeguard autonomy and resilience in a volatile geopolitical landscape.

Saudi Arabia exemplifies the GCC's pragmatic turn through its deliberate efforts to balance strategic relationships without committing to exclusive alliances. Within the framework of Vision 2030, Riyadh has actively expanded economic cooperation with China in areas such as energy exports, infrastructure development, and digital technology, while simultaneously sustaining its long-standing security partnership with the United States. This dual-track policy reflects a conscious decision to prioritize national development objectives over ideological or alliance-driven commitments. Pragmatism enables Saudi Arabia to pursue diverse partnerships that support its transition toward a knowledge-based and diversified economy, while still preserving the security assurances central to its regional stability. Ultimately, this calculated balance underscores Riyadh's broader strategy of navigating multipolar competition in a way that secures both economic transformation and geopolitical leverage.

The continuity of pragmatism in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is shaped by a set of interrelated economic, political, and security determinants. Economically, the GCC countries remain deeply committed to diversification strategies aimed at reducing reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, which necessitates maintaining broad and flexible partnerships with both Eastern and Western powers. Politically, the rise of multipolarity has created a context in which strict alignment with a single bloc is increasingly costly, making pragmatic engagement a rational choice for maximizing national interests. On the security front, the enduring reliance on the United States as a defense guarantor coexists with a growing economic dependence on China and other Asian partners, reinforcing a dual-track approach. This combination of drivers ensures that pragmatism remains not just a temporary strategy but a structural necessity for the GCC states to safeguard autonomy, stability, and relevance within the evolving international order.

In Saudi Arabia, the determinants of pragmatic continuity are particularly pronounced due to the scale of its economic ambitions and geopolitical weight. The cornerstone of this pragmatism lies in Vision 2030, which sets a comprehensive framework for reducing dependence on oil, fostering renewable energy, and attracting foreign investment. To achieve these goals, Riyadh requires diversified partnerships that extend beyond traditional Western allies, making cooperation with China and other Asian economies indispensable. At the same time, the Kingdom's enduring reliance on the United States for military support and regional security compels it to avoid an exclusive pivot toward the East. Domestic legitimacy also plays a role, as leadership seeks to demonstrate tangible economic and social transformation to its population, reinforcing the need for pragmatic engagement that delivers results. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's pragmatic continuity is determined by its ability to institutionalize economic cooperation with multiple partners while carefully balancing security imperatives, thereby positioning itself as a central actor in a multipolar world.

For Saudi Arabia, the future pathways of pragmatic relations will be closely tied to the successful implementation of Vision 2030 and its ambition to position the Kingdom as a global investment hub. Riyadh is expected to expand economic

collaboration with China in areas such as green energy, advanced technologies, and infrastructure, while simultaneously reinforcing its security ties with the United States. This dual engagement strategy underscores the Kingdom's commitment to pragmatic flexibility, allowing it to leverage economic opportunities from the East while preserving the strategic security umbrella of the West. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's increasing regional leadership role will require balancing its partnerships to avoid overdependence on any single power. In this context, the institutionalization of pragmatic relations—anchored in economic modernization, technological innovation, and diversified alliances—will serve as the foundation for Riyadh's sustained influence in a rapidly shifting global order.

Method

In-depth interviews (IDIs) are a qualitative research method designed to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations in detail. Unlike structured surveys or standardized questionnaires, in-depth interviews rely on open-ended, flexible conversations that allow respondents to articulate their thoughts in their own words. This approach enables researchers to capture the richness, complexity, and contextual nuances of human experience that might otherwise remain hidden in more rigid forms of inquiry.

In this study, six in-depth interviews were conducted with academic experts, all of whom specialize in the field of Chinese–Arab relations.

The expert's name	The position
Samer Kheir Ahmad	Specialist in Chinese politics
Habib Badawi	Specialist in Chinese–Middle Eastern relations
Samer Al-Hajjat	specialist in Chinese–Middle Eastern relations / lecturer at Lusail University
Buthaina Zawahrah	Senior research fellow at Asia Middle East Center for Research and Dialogue (AMEC). PhD candidate in International Relations at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Former lecturer at Sun Yat-sen University, China.
Shen shi lei	Zhejiang gongshang university
Haitham Al-sayed	Specialist in Chinese–Middle Eastern relations

Results

Sustaining Pragmatically Balanced Relations

Samer Kheir Ahmad observed that "The Gulf region has not yet abandoned its close strategic relationship with Washington, even though it has been marked by

certain disagreements in recent years, particularly during President Joe Biden's administration." Habib emphasized that "Regional tensions play a highly sensitive role in shaping the trajectory of Sino-Gulf relations, as they constitute a factor that may threaten the pragmatic balance China has sought to establish in its engagement with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. China, which adheres to a foreign policy of non-interference, occasionally finds itself confronted with challenges imposed by the complexities of the region, potentially placing its traditional neutrality to the test." According to Buthaina and Faten, "This model, based on 'economic cooperation as the core, and the pursuit of mutual benefit and shared gains as the ultimate goal,' enables both parties to maintain a high level of pragmatism." Buthaina Zawahrah further noted that "This model sustains mutually beneficial ties while avoiding military alliances or political alignment, reinforcing a durable transactional partnership." Finally, Samer Al-Hajjat highlighted that "A relationship founded on mutual interests rather than alliances, at least in the near to medium term." Dr. Haitham Al-Sayed observed that the nature of Chinese foreign policy is based on the principle of "non-interference" and a focus on economy and development. This grants China a high capacity to adopt pragmatism in dealing with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978, China has pursued this approach in its foreign relations, which gave it the green light to normalize its external relations with many countries, including Saudi Arabia. In addition, China's economic growth relies heavily on external exports. China consistently upholds the slogan of "mutual cooperation and win-win results," as it avoids creating negative impacts on its foreign exports. It therefore works more flexibly with countries that pursue development, aiming to achieve shared benefits between both sides.

- **Mutual needs:** China requires energy (oil and gas), while Saudi Arabia needs investment, technology, and access to vast markets. This balance makes pragmatism the optimal choice.
- **International multipolarity:** In light of U.S.-China competition, Beijing seeks to present itself as an "economic partner that does not impose political conditions," which reinforces the sustainability of pragmatism in the foreseeable future.

Pragmatism over Alliances

Samer Kheir Ahmad stated:

Economic partnerships are an integral part of the pragmatic relations between China and the Gulf states. For China, these economic partnerships serve as the foundation for building multifaceted relations with the world. Since China is keen in its international political conduct to avoid appearing confrontational toward the United States—so as to delay, as much as possible, any disruption to its global projects—it is even more logical for Beijing to act pragmatically with regions that have long been considered traditional spheres of U.S. influence, such as the Arabian Gulf, rather than seeking explicit alliances with them. Thus, the pragmatic economic relationship between the Gulf states and China constitutes a notable political success for Beijing, given that the region had, for decades, been closed to anything but American influence. Moreover, in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that China will seek to transform its ties with the region from pragmatic economic partnerships into political alliances. Likewise, it remains premature to

assume that forging an alliance with China could become a demand from the Gulf Arab states.

Habib Badawy noted:

So far, yes. Sino-Saudi relations are characterized by a focus on economic and technological cooperation, without evolving into political or security alliances. China does not seek to compete with the United States in guaranteeing Gulf security; rather, it prefers to remain a reliable economic partner. This model allows Saudi Arabia to diversify its international partnerships without undermining its traditional alliances, while granting China economic influence without becoming entangled in geopolitical complexities.

Buthaina Faten explained:

Yes, this pattern is expected to persist for a relatively long period. Despite the intensive interaction between China and Saudi Arabia in the fields of economy, trade, energy, and technology, China consistently avoids entering into relationships of the type characterized as 'military alliances' or 'confrontational strategic alliances.' Beijing's policy toward the Middle East emphasizes 'partnership' rather than 'alliance.'

Buthaina Zawahrah added:

In the short to medium term, Sino-Gulf relations are expected to remain primarily economic and transactional rather than evolving into formal alliances. Rooted in China's Belt and Road Initiative and 'go-out' strategy, the focus continues to be on trade, investment, and infrastructure rather than defense cooperation. For Gulf states, the partnership provides capital, technology, and markets to support diversification, while China secures energy supplies and access to regional markets. Although areas of collaboration have expanded to include green technology and finance, the relationship lacks the security framework of U.S.-Gulf ties, functioning instead as a pragmatic partnership with potential strategic hedging implications.

Samer Al-Hajjat concluded:

Most likely yes, the relationship will remain more economic than political or military.

Haitham-Al-sayed said:

To a large extent: it is unlikely that Saudi-Chinese relations will evolve into a security or military alliance similar to the Gulf's alliances with the United States.

- The reason is that Beijing does not want to involve itself militarily in a region full of conflicts; rather, it prefers to play the role of a "mediator," as demonstrated in the 2023 Saudi-Iran agreement.
- The economy, technology, and energy will remain the main drivers. Even the Belt and Road projects in the Gulf focus on infrastructure, logistics, and artificial intelligence, rather than military alliances.

Determinants of Pragmatic Continuity

Samer stated:

The outcomes of the struggle over the shape of the international order will determine this in the future. Pragmatism could be replaced by alliances if China's global presence advances while that of the United States declines, although such a scenario is unlikely in the coming decades.

Habib explained:

Several factors may influence the continuation of this pragmatic approach. First, regional tensions, such as the Saudi-Iranian conflict, may compel China to adopt more explicit positions. Second, the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States could push Washington to pressure its Gulf partners to reduce their openness to Beijing. Third, shifts in the global energy market—particularly the growing reliance on renewable energy—may reshape China's priorities in the region. Finally, the extent to which both sides can separate economic cooperation from political positions will determine the future of pragmatism.

Buthaina Faten emphasized:

The regional security situation constitutes an important factor that may influence the course of this pragmatism.

Buthaina Zawahrah elaborated:

The persistence of the Sino-Saudi pragmatic relations will largely depend on the balance between U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry, mutual economic needs, Saudi domestic reforms, and the institutionalization of bilateral cooperation. While U.S. pressure and the threat of secondary sanctions could challenge purely transactional ties, pragmatism is likely to persist as long as China depends on Gulf oil and Saudi Arabia relies on Chinese financing, technology, and industrial support. The trajectory of Vision 2030 will be central, since successful diversification would allow Riyadh to demand technology transfer, joint ventures, and local benefits from Chinese firms, moving the relationship beyond resource trade. Moreover, deeper institutional frameworks through Chinese financial platforms, renewable energy projects, and integration of Chinese companies into Saudi value chains, would strengthen the durability and pragmatic character of this partnership.

Samer Al-Hajjat added:

There are many factors to consider. For instance, if the United States reduces its security commitment to the Gulf, Saudi Arabia may contemplate strengthening and diversifying its partnership with China. Likewise, the growth of Chinese foreign investment in Saudi Arabia, increased trade exchange, and intensified diplomatic engagement will further strengthen Sino-Saudi economic relations. Conversely, a slowdown in China's economy or regional crises could have negative effects. In other words, the very existence of pragmatism is tied to the current international order, particularly to the balance of power between the United States and China.

Haitham Al-Sayed stated:

U.S. pressure: If tensions between Washington and Beijing escalate, the United States may push its allies to reduce their engagement with China, which would weaken Saudi Arabia's ability to balance its relations with both the United States and China.

Security issues: If Saudi Arabia is compelled to request direct security support from China (for example, advanced arms deals or protection against regional threats), its "economic neutrality" may be broken.

Energy dynamics: Saudi Arabia's continued role as a major oil supplier to China (especially if demand for Russian oil declines in the future) will further strengthen economic cooperation.

Intra-Gulf balances: Some Gulf states may open wider doors to Beijing, while others may adhere more closely to Washington, which could affect the “collective character of relations.”

Future Pathways of Pragmatic Relations

Samer Kheir Ahmad observed:

We must take into account that the deepening of Gulf relations—particularly Saudi Arabia’s—with China in recent years has occurred as part of the Gulf’s reaction to the Biden administration’s policy of reducing its level of engagement in the Middle East and the Gulf region, in favor of focusing on East Asia and ‘integrated deterrence’ toward China. This implies that a renewed U.S. engagement in the affairs of this region would keep Sino-Gulf relations within their pragmatic framework. Such a scenario appeared more evident during Donald Trump’s presidency, and may remain the case in the coming decades, pending any fundamental changes in the United States’ international political behavior, should they occur.

Habib Badawi noted:

Nevertheless, the expansion of this relationship could lead to a broader strategic partnership, especially if U.S. dominance in the region declines or if Saudi Arabia’s need to diversify its international partners increases. Conversely, if geopolitical pressures intensify or energy priorities shift, the relationship may experience a form of retreat or rebalancing.

Butaina Faten highlighted:

Short term (5–10 years): Cooperation in the fields of energy and investment will remain the main focus, and China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will intersect with ‘Saudi Vision 2030’ to create new points of convergence. Medium term (10–20 years): As the energy transition advances, the two sides may witness new cooperation in renewable energy, the digital economy, artificial intelligence, and infrastructure modernization.”

Butaina Zawahrah explained:

China’s growing role in Saudi Arabia reflects a pragmatic deepening of economic engagement, particularly in manufacturing, logistics, digital infrastructure, and renewable energy, where China is emerging as a key provider of greenfield FDI and industrial contracts. Rather than replacing its security ties with the United States, Riyadh is adopting a multipolar hedging strategy that leverages China as an economic partner while maintaining Western security guarantees. This shift is moving Sino-Saudi relations from transactional trade toward longer-term industrial partnerships, emphasizing joint ventures, local content, and technology transfer in critical sectors such as advanced technology and supply chains. However, the trajectory of this relationship depends on external risks such as sanctions, U.S.-China rivalry, or changes in China’s lending practices, balanced against the potential for institutionalized cooperation through mechanisms like Public Investment Fund (PIF) partnerships and expanded financial platforms.

Samer Al-Hajjat concluded:

Economic relations will expand and diversify into areas such as renewable energy, technology, and nuclear energy for civilian use. We may also see limited cooperation in the security or military sphere, such as increased arms sales or

collaboration in modern militarization. However, this will not reach the level of a formal alliance like that with the United States in the near to medium term." Haitham AL-Sayed:

- **Short term (5 years):** Continued focus on economic and technological partnerships (renewable energy, artificial intelligence, infrastructure, and ports).
- **Medium term (10 years):** Strengthening China's role as a "major investor" in Saudi Vision 2030 projects, while the security dimension remains very limited.
- **Long term (15-20 years):** A gradual shift may occur if:
 - Gulf confidence in the United States declines.
 - China decides to play a larger security role in the region to protect its strategic interests.

Discussion

China-Gulf relations represent a modern model of international interaction, as they were not founded on a solid ideological basis as was common in traditional alliance models. Instead, they are built on practical pragmatic foundations. According to the non-pragmatic theory, the sustainability of this type of relationship remains experimental, given the novelty of this model and its reliance on the logic of mutual benefit, far from rigid ideological or political commitments. Observation shows that these relations offer tangible alternatives for both parties, with the intense trade exchanges between China and the Gulf countries serving as practical evidence of the deepening partnership. Moreover, the flexibility of China-Gulf relations stems from the nature of Chinese foreign policy itself, which primarily relies on the concept of "partnerships" rather than "alliances." China allows its partners considerable freedom in managing their international relationships, with ties built on criteria of mutual interest and benefit, rather than ideological foundations. This approach significantly contributes to the prospects of sustained cooperation with Gulf states, preserving their independence in forging external relations without political pressure from China.

Regarding economic transactions between the two sides, recent years have witnessed an increase in agreements that reflect genuine and reciprocal needs. On one hand, Gulf countries seek to diversify their economies and reduce reliance on oil, making them in need of Chinese technological expertise and investments. On the other hand, China's economy heavily depends on imports of oil and gas to ensure its energy security, rendering the Gulf region a vital partner. These mutual interests establish a strong foundation for a sustainable relationship, provided that both parties continue managing it according to the principles of mutual benefit and non-interference in internal affairs. In light of the above, it can be said that although China-Gulf relations are still in the formative stage and undergoing a test of resilience, they possess promising elements for continuity and growth—on the condition that the pragmatic character distinguishing them from traditional relationship models is preserved. Lons (2024) conducted an in-depth examination of the evolving relationship between China and the Gulf states, with particular emphasis on economic cooperation. The analysis demonstrates that bilateral engagement has expanded significantly beyond conventional domains such as

energy and infrastructure. According to the study's findings, China–Gulf economic relations are increasingly diversifying into a wide range of sectors, many of which hold strategic importance, including emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, logistics and supply chain management, critical minerals, and renewable energy industries.

Based on the findings of the in-depth interviews and within the framework of the proposed theoretical lens, several key dimensions can be identified regarding the future trajectory of Sino-Gulf relations. Sustaining Pragmatically Balanced Relations. The perspectives of scholars diverge on China's ability to maintain its pragmatic approach in its engagement with the Gulf states. Some argue that as long as these relations remain anchored in mutual interests, their pragmatic character will endure. Others, however, suggest that the rapid and ongoing transformations within the international system may, over the long term, compel both parties to adopt alternative forms of interaction that extend beyond the conventional boundaries of pragmatism. Pragmatism over Alliances. There is an almost unanimous consensus that Sino-Gulf relations in general, and Sino-Saudi relations in particular, will remain grounded in pragmatism for the foreseeable future. The current model of cooperation, which prioritizes economic exchange and mutual benefit, continues to satisfy the strategic needs of both sides, thereby reducing the likelihood of these ties evolving into formal political or security alliances. Determinants of Pragmatic Continuity. Researchers broadly agree that the endurance of this pragmatic orientation is intrinsically linked to the pursuit of mutual interests and, by extension, to the broader structure of the international order. In this regard, pragmatism is not perceived as a static condition but as a dynamic framework contingent upon global power configurations. Future Prospects. In the near term, this relationship is expected to remain confined to its pragmatic-economic domain, without progressing to more advanced political or security levels, unless significant shifts occur in the international environment. This indicates that the continuity of pragmatism in Sino-Gulf relations is deeply conditioned by structural determinants in the global system and the evolving balance of power between major actors. Duan (2022) concludes that, despite intensifying systemic pressures, Saudi–China relations are likely to remain shaped by economic pragmatism and strategic hedging. The study posits that this dynamic will sustain a dualistic structure in which Saudi Arabia maintains its security alliance with the United States while simultaneously deepening its economic partnership with China.

One limitation of the study lies in its predominantly qualitative approach, which would benefit from the incorporation of numerical data. Integrating quantitative evidence could enhance the robustness of the analysis and allow for more rigorous comparisons between qualitative and quantitative findings.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the Sino-Gulf relations in the light of Economic Pragmatism Theory. The results show that this kind of relation is still in the formative stage and undergoing a test of resilience. However, if this kind of relation can be succeeded this means that there will be model for the economic pragmatism relation. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews show that in the short-

term there will not be any change for the relation between China and Saudi Arabia. For future research, it is recommended to do more research in different methodologies to evaluate this type of relations. Especially whether if it can be such a model in the pragmatic aspect.

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