

# The Role of Regional Powers in the Contemporary Complex Geo-Political Environment

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## **Key Points**

- Reduced US concentration on several regions of the world created new space for regional actors to not only influence respective regions, but also to radiate their impact in corresponding neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>
- Analyzing the criticality of the decisive decade, the US needs to consider the increasing leverage of 'regional powers', which may impact Strategic Competition and US interests.
- The rise of regional powers is not a threat to the US, but an opportunity for a new era of prosperity and constructive problem solving. Post WWII, what matters now is the fluidity and adaptability with which the US seeks to work with the regional powers in addition to traditional treaty allies.
- Strategic Competition poses great challenges for regional states in balancing their acts towards major competitors; engagement with the US and China is often described as a choice between 'band wagoning' and 'balancing'. Having levelled relations with both the US and China, regional powers can afford better opportunities to bind both superpowers to the rules.
- Regional powers, in view of their 'greater status,' are expected to be more responsible; need to look in to internal and external alleged poor policies impacting their regional ambitions e.g India, an aspiring regional power, needs to act more responsible/ rational with its neighbors, who repudiate Indian policies in the region.
- Primarily, economic partnerships and asymmetric challenges (pandemics, climate change) have brought the world closer together and made it interdependent, entailing mutual action by different actors/ powers.

## **Introduction**

Since the late 20th century, the term 'regional power' in international relations has been used for a sovereign state that exercises significant power within a given geographical region. There is a broad consensus that a necessary condition for regional 'power hood' is that these states be powerful in terms of valued resources in relation to the other states within a geographic region.<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the century, there was an expectation of a looming global

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<sup>1</sup> Regional powers expected to ensure stability and effective regional support in a world that is gradually difficult to govern.

<sup>2</sup> The regional powers display comparatively high military, economic, political, and ideological capabilities enabling them to shape their regional security agenda.

power shift from the West to the East, and from the North to the South. The central dynamic related to the expected power shifts was a perceived weakening of the ‘West’ and the withdrawal of the US from several world regions, which created new space for regional actors. While the end of the Cold War set regions free from the overwhelming influence of the two superpowers and thereby gave regional powers greater room for maneuver, we have recently witnessed a further shift.

### **Different Perspectives and Explanations**

Typically, regional powers have capabilities, which are important and can contribute to the development of the region. Slightly contrasting definitions differ as to what makes a regional power,<sup>3</sup> as the European Consortium for Political Research defines a regional power as a state belonging to a geographically defined region, dominating this region in economic and military terms, able to exercise hegemonic influence in the region and considerable influence on the world scale, willing to make use of power resources and recognized or even accepted as the regional leader by its neighbors. The term ‘regional powers’ has sometimes been used by politicians as a derogatory term – think of President Obama, who dismissed Russia as a ‘regional power’ in 2014. However, many writers argue in favor of using ‘regional powers’ as an analytical category to capture the regional status of such countries. Even the US can be considered a regional power within North America, while at the same time it is obviously a great power with global reach and influence.<sup>4</sup> Regional Power is a new normal — the trademark of the emerging international order. Josef Borell, Vice President of the European Commission, describes<sup>5</sup> the world structure as more complex because ‘an emerging Sino-American bipolarity is increasingly structuring the world system’. Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, on his one-day trip to China, concluded that ‘new centers of power are emerging in a multipolar world, and we aim to establish and expand partnerships with all of them’.<sup>6</sup>

### **Criteria for Qualification of Regional Powers**

The regional powers display comparatively high military, economic, political and ideological capabilities that enable them to shape their regional security agenda<sup>7</sup>. Given that ‘regional power’ is an evolving concept, what are the constitutive elements for being classified as a regional power? The status of a regional power is ultimately awarded by the other states of the region through the recognition of the superior power capabilities of the regional power. The German Institute of Global and Area Studies<sup>8</sup> (GIGA) states that a regional power must:<sup>9</sup>

- Be part of a definable region with its own identity.
- Integrate well into the region.
- Claim to be a regional power (self-image/ projection as a regional power).
- Exert a decisive influence on the geographic extent of the region.
- Maintain relatively high military, economic, demographic, political and ideological capabilities.
- Define a high priority regional security agenda and relate to regional and global forums.
- Be appreciated as a regional power by other powers in the region and beyond.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional_power)

<sup>4</sup> Regional Powers an evolving Concept; [www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/regional-powers-still-matter](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/regional-powers-still-matter)

<sup>5</sup> The emerging multipolar world order; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2022.2151896>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2022.2151896>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nes.princeton.edu/publications/middle-powers-and-regional-powers>

<sup>8</sup> GIGA-based research unveiled patterns of leadership and followership, hegemony and contestation, explored the regional powers’ uncertain influence on regional cooperation as well as the complex relationships between regional and global policies.

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional\\_power](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional_power)

### Expectations from Regional Powers

- Regional powers have been considered important contributors to regional and global order as they are expected to ensure stability and effective regional cooperation in a world that is increasingly difficult to govern.<sup>10</sup>
- They are expected to maintain the international order through coalition-building, by serving as mediators, as well as through international conflict management and resolution activities such as UN peacekeeping, etc.
- Global powers are allegedly not ready to engage in serious rebuilding of the world order, and that gap is expected to be filled by regional powers.

### Comparison between ‘Regional Powers’ and ‘Middle Powers’

The terms middle powers and regional powers are increasingly used by politicians, pundits, and scholars, even though both words remain vague, and their meanings are contentious.<sup>11</sup> Middle powers often refer to states that occupy a middle-level position in the international power spectrum, just below superpowers or great power. Overall, the terms ‘middle powers’ and ‘regional powers’ convey capacities, hierarchy, influence and aspirations.

### Regional Powers in ME

Though the regional power dynamics of the ME were relatively stable since the end of the Cold War, a combination of the upheavals, revolutions, civil wars<sup>12</sup> in the region, and increasing interests of China and Russia, due to US shift towards Indo-pacific obliged the regional countries to leverage themselves to meet their foreign policy objectives. In order to explain and highlight the significance of ‘Regional Powers’, ***two case study countries in the ME region*** are discussed:

#### Iran

The following aspects underlines the characterization of Iran as a regional power:

- Historic supremacy and influence of Iran in the Persian Gulf, the Persian identity and the self-esteem based on great civilization obligates Iran to attain the status of regional power.
- Geography affords Iran justification to claim a regional power status, being located at a strategic intersection between the Arab, Turkish, Russian and Asian worlds. Iran exploits its critical location on the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, which are vital maritime pathways for crude oil transport.
- Ambitious Iran aims to demonstrate its effectiveness as regional hegemon by supporting proxy forces in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria; depicts itself as a protector and custodian of the Shiite Crescent in the world.
- Though the Iranian regime is under sanctions, the Iranian oil market (ranking fifth where its productive capacity is four million barrels per day) and natural gas reserves<sup>13</sup> enabled Iran to create economic space.
- Iran is exploiting nuclear capabilities to seek regional hegemony.
- By resisting US policies, Iran present itself as a ‘triumphant’ against the Western predicaments.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/regional-powers-still-matter>

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford Bibliographies; Middle Powers and Regional Powers - International Relations - Oxford Bibliographies*

<sup>12</sup> Arab Spring, Syrian War, Yemen Conflict and Russian invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>13</sup> After Russia, Iran is the state which has the second-largest reserves of natural gas. Iran holds nearly 17 percent of the world’s reserves of natural gas.

### **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The following aspects underlines the characterization of KSA as a regional power:

- KSA plays a dominant and pre-eminent role in the Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>14</sup> (GCC) and has been an anchor<sup>15</sup> of stability and growth in the Gulf and beyond.
- KSA is determined to limit Iran's expansion into what it sees as its region of influence, particularly in bordering Bahrain, Iraq, and Yemen.
- Utilizing its strategic importance, KSA has been able to successfully navigate the complicated relationships with traditional powers such as the US and Europe, as well as emerging powers such as China<sup>16</sup> and Russia.
- KSA holds the unique privilege being custodian of two holy mosques, the religious sites where all Muslims of the world are attracted to. The Kingdom is the citadel of Islam and leads the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the largest representative body of the fifty-seven Muslim countries.
- KSA is likely to be one of the world's fastest-growing economies,<sup>17</sup> in view of sweeping pro-business reforms and a sharp rise in oil prices; GDP is expected to expand by 7.6 percent, the fastest growth in almost a decade.
- As strategic competition is being actually manifested in the GCC, KSA is leveraging its strengths to attain regional power status while balancing its acts between the global powers.

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

- Increased leverage of regional powers is a reality; to maintain the status of global power and counter Chinese rising influence, US engagement with regional powers is crucial.
- US National Security and Defense Strategies correctly labels 'partner's role' as 'US COG'; the attainment of strategic interests in this decisive decade is contingent upon US acceptance of enhanced role of regional powers and constructive engagement with these regional countries.
- China has emerged as the major pole in structuring the 'new multipolar world order', and its efforts are supported by several regional powers in different regions, who are cozying up more towards China than the US; the US needs to critically analyze the reasons for this change, including *Chinese strategy of engagement* which is taking regional countries away from US.
- Regional Powers no longer want to be followers and resent external hegemony. They themselves now try to lead; guard their own interests and unwilling to make compromises.
- The US reliance on partners and logic to justify these partnerships for competition with China and Russia reflects its short-sighted approach and will be counterproductive in long term.
- The current global powers, which focused on their 'strategic competition', have failed, on an individual and collective levels, to settle the burning and longstanding disputes/ crisis in different regions and, unfortunately, have acted only once the crisis has been related to their interests.
- US President Biden is pushing the wrong narrative by stating that world is facing a clear choice between democracy or autocracy; this narrative is refuted in a multipolar world with many regional powers pursuing their own interests.

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<sup>14</sup> GCC was established on 11th Nov 1981, post Iranian forces illegally occupying three Islands of the UAE and Arab Gulf states felt a threat from the emerging military capability of Iran. That is why other Arab states formed a unification against Iran and so it resulted in the formation of the GCC in 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Because it is the largest economy in the Arab world, it acts as a major source of economic support for struggling Arab nations and it is the largest state in the Gulf region, setting the agenda of GCC. It is the leader of global energy sector due to its exceptional ability to act as a swing producer and stabilize global energy prices.

<sup>16</sup> China is also Saudi's largest trading partner. As of 2021, trade between the two countries was \$87 billion.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/08/09/CF-Saudi-Arabia-to-grow-at-fastest-pace>

- In the wake of new unconventional threats, the world cannot afford the negative impacts of strategic competition between the US and China; the recent meeting of Xi and Biden at the G20 summit, which agreed to engage and not to start a new Cold War, is a step in the right direction.

### **Recommendations**

- Considering the importance of regional powers, ***USCENTCOM may diversify its engagement***, focused on long-term projects aimed at strengthening mil-to-mil relationships, while denying competitors the strategic space; the US needs to offer better investments/ opportunities to ***maintain its status of 'strategic choice'*** in eyes of regional powers as reliable partner and ally.
- The US may take measures to ***maximize gain in this 'decisive decade' by engaging with regional powers*** to maintain its relevance as a responsible and dependable global power. ***Leverage its 'unique strength' of historical strong bonds with partners*** by replacing transactional and limited engagements with mutually beneficial and profitable long-term investments.
- Instead of attributing responsibility to regional powers and leaving them to act on their own, the US may need to be more attentive to these countries' concerns and render possible assistance in their positive endeavors, mitigating regional and global challenges.
- In the present 'multi-polar geo-political paradigm', construct of blocs is not coherent, therefore instead of dividing the world into different blocs to serve the strategic competition, US policymakers may push/ execute agendas of mutual benefits i.e infrastructure development, climate and food security.
- Retract from 'with us or against us' rhetoric: There's no 'choice' between the US and China and there's certainly no way to thwart China's rise through intimidation of partners. These efforts are potentially very destructive for the regional powers caught in the crossfire. Instead, ***act pragmatically towards the 'identified CoG' to attain desired strategic effects.***