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Gulf–South Asia Relations in an Era of Deepening Interdependence

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2. Abstract

The relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and South Asia is undergoing a profound transformation, evolving beyond traditional labour migration and energy trade into a multifaceted partnership shaped by economic, strategic, technological, and cultural linkages. This shift reflects several Gulf states' economic diversification plans alongside South Asia's growing geopolitical weight, rapid economic growth, and technological advancements. Interdependence now spans critical areas including trade, investment, remittances, renewable energy, infrastructure, food security, and emerging domains like cyber and space cooperation. Defence ties, too, are deepening, as seen in the Saudi–Pakistan defence pact, signalling a shift from transactional engagements to institutionalised strategic partnerships. Against this backdrop, this workshop will bring together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to examine the drivers, dynamics, and implications of evolving relations between GCC and South Asian states. The workshop will explore historical foundations, economic interdependencies, strategic alignments, and the enduring role of labour mobility, while also considering future frameworks for institutionalised cooperation. By situating Gulf–South Asia relations within wider debates on connectivity, multipolarity, and global governance, the workshop aims to generate fresh research agendas, inform policy

strategies, and deepen scholarly understanding of this increasingly consequential transregional partnership.

3. Context

The relationship between the GCC states and South Asia is undergoing a noticeable transformation. Historically anchored in patterns of labour migration and energy trade, the ties between these two regions have significantly evolved over the past few decades. Today, they encompass an increasingly complex web of economic, political, strategic, technological, and cultural interactions. This shift reflects not only the growing economic diversification and strategic ambitions of Gulf states but also the rising geopolitical and developmental importance of South Asia (Jeong, 2020).

At the heart of this evolving relationship is a deepening interdependence driven by shared opportunities and mutual vulnerabilities. Gulf states rely heavily on South Asia's vast labour force, expanding consumer markets, and growing technological capabilities, while South Asian economies continue to depend on Gulf energy supplies, investment capital, and remittance flows. There is no data available on the exact number of South Asian migrant workers in the GCC states, but as per an estimate there are about 24 million South Asian expatriate workers (Rahman, 2010). These interdependencies are being redefined amidst wider global transformations, such as shifting power balances, the recalibration of US and Chinese regional roles, and a heightened emphasis on defence cooperation, connectivity, innovation, and sustainable development.

The strategic dimensions of Gulf–South Asia relations are also expanding. As the Gulf states seek to diversify their economies under long-term strategic plans, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Centennial 2071, due to which partnerships with South Asian countries are becoming increasingly crucial in areas like infrastructure development, renewable energy, technology transfer, and food security. Also, geopolitical and security cooperation is intensifying, ranging from counterterrorism and maritime security to emerging collaborations in cyber defence and space exploration. Defence relations between GCC and South Asian states have evolved significantly over the decades, transitioning from traditional military diplomacy, including training exchanges, joint exercises, and military advisory roles, to more institutionalised and strategic partnerships (Karim, 2025; Pardhan, 2012). This progression is now reflected in the recent defence pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which represents the culmination of Riyadh's longstanding soft power in shaping bilateral ties and strategic cooperation with Islamabad (El Dahan and Shah, 2025; Ahmed and Karim, 2024).

These dynamics underscore the need for a deeper scholarly understanding of how these partnerships are reshaping regional orders and influencing global governance. Against

this backdrop, the proposed workshop will convene leading scholars, early-career researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to examine the multifaceted nature of Gulf–South Asia relations. Through historical, economic, and strategic perspectives, the workshop will explore the forces driving evolving partnerships, the policy choices shaping these trajectories, and the structural challenges that must be addressed to fully realise the potential of cooperation between GCC and South Asian states. The workshop will examine the historical and cultural foundations of the relationship and their contemporary relevance; assess evolving economic interdependencies in trade, investment, energy, and technology; and analyse the strategic and security dimensions of cooperation in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

Equally important, the workshop will investigate how labour mobility and human capital exchanges continue to underpin foreign policy choices, while also exploring future policy frameworks that could institutionalise cooperation and manage interdependence more effectively. By situating Gulf–South Asia relations within broader debates on interregional connectivity, global order, and multipolarity, the workshop will generate new research agendas, inform policymaking, and foster collaborative scholarship that reflects the growing strategic significance of this vital transregional relationship.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The rationale for convening this workshop lies in the urgent need for deeper scholarly engagement with the profound shifts currently redefining Gulf–South Asia relations. As both regions navigate a rapidly changing global environment — marked by power realignments, intensified great-power competition, technological transformation, and emerging security challenges — their interactions are acquiring new significance and complexity. These evolving dynamics have far-reaching consequences for trade, investment, energy security, migration governance, and defence cooperation. By examining these trends through historical, economic, and strategic lenses, the workshop seeks to fill a critical gap in existing scholarship and policy analysis. Hence, it will also contribute

to shaping future research and strategic level decision-making that can better institutionalise cooperation, manage interdependence, and harness the transformative potential of this pivotal transregional partnership.

Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of the proposed workshop is to provide a timely platform for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to critically examine the evolving Gulf-South Asia relationship. By moving beyond the traditional narratives of labour migration and energy trade, the workshop aims to unpack the multidimensional nature of contemporary Gulf–South Asia relations, by focusing on economic, political, strategic, technological,

and cultural dimensions. It seeks to analyse the structural drivers of this transformation, including both internal and external factors, to assess how these forces are shaping patterns of interdependence, cooperation, and competition. The workshop will particularly focus on understanding the policy choices and strategic calculations underpinning this partnership, as well as the implications for regional order, global governance, and interregional connectivity. This workshop will build on the growing academic interest in south-south cooperation by inviting multidisciplinary contributions from sub-fields in political science, such as foreign policy analysis, comparative politics, and international relations, to answer the following questions:

- How have Gulf–South Asia relations evolved beyond traditional labour and energy linkages, and what historical factors continue to shape their contemporary dynamics?
- In what ways do Gulf and South Asian states rely on each other for labour, energy, investment and foreign aid, and technology, and how are these interdependencies changing?
- What internal and external drivers, including economic diversification plans of Gulf states, demographic change, and global power shifts, are most influential in shaping Gulf–South Asia partnerships?
- How do shared vulnerabilities, such as regional instability, transnational crimes, energy and food security, and climate change, shape policy decisions and cooperative frameworks between the two regions?
- Can the Gulf–South Asia interdependencies be leveraged to build more institutionalised and resilient partnerships, or do they risk creating asymmetric dependencies for example through increasing dependence of remittances and aid?
- How are shifting global power dynamics, including US retrenchment, China’s growing influence, and the rise of multipolarity, reshaping Gulf–South Asia relations?
- What strategic calculations drive closer security, defence, and technological cooperation, and how do these align with broader regional and global security architectures?
- How do Gulf and South Asian states navigate competing alignments and balance relations with major powers while deepening ties with each other?

5. Paper Focus/Topics

Papers submitted to the workshop are expected to address some of the following topics:

- The historical evolution of Gulf–South Asia relations beyond labour migration and energy trade.
- Patterns of economic interdependence, investment and aid flows, and potential asymmetries in Gulf–South Asia relations.
- The role of South Asia in supporting Gulf states’ economic diversification agendas, including Vision 2030 and Centennial 2071.

- The impact of shifting global power dynamics and multipolarity on Gulf–South Asia strategic relations.
- The transformation of defence and security cooperation, from traditional military diplomacy to institutionalised strategic partnerships.
- Shared vulnerabilities and collaborative approaches to energy security, food security, and climate change.
- Emerging areas of cooperation in technology, innovation, renewable energy, cyber security, and space exploration.
- Strategic balancing and alignment choices amid intensifying U.S.–China competition and evolving geopolitical orders.
- The significance of labour mobility, diaspora networks, and human capital exchanges in shaping foreign policy strategies.
- Policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms for enhancing interregional connectivity and long-term cooperation.

6. Publication Plans

We plan to publish the workshop proceedings as an edited volume with Palgrave or Routledge, and we will approach these publishers once the paper abstracts have been selected. Our first choice is to publish an edited book in the Routledge book series ‘The Arabian Gulf States in Transition’. Our objective is to produce a high-quality edited book in which selected papers undergo a rigorous peer-review process.

The volume will examine the multidimensional nature of Gulf–South Asia relations through the analytical framework of interdependence. Using this framework, the book will highlight how Gulf states and South Asian countries are connected through overlapping and mutually reinforcing economic, cultural, political, demographic, and defence linkages. The analysis will show that these relationships are not unidirectional but are shaped by reciprocal needs, shared vulnerabilities, labour and migration flows, energy interdependence, investment patterns, and evolving geopolitical alignments. By foregrounding interdependence, the edited volume will highlight the complex ways in which South Asian states engage with Gulf partners and how these engagements, in turn, shape regional and national priorities on both sides.

Following the July 2026 workshop, contributors will revise their papers and submit the final drafts by 1 October 2026. The workshop directors, acting as volume editors, will then review, edit, and compile the chapters for submission to the publisher by 1 January 2027.

7. References

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Workshop Directors

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Prof. Dr. Mujtaba Isani is the DAAD Professor of Political Science at the Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan. He was previously a Professor for Empirical Political Science

at the University of Muenster, an Assistant Professor at the King Fahd University in Saudi Arabia, an Assistant Professor at Habib University, a Senior Data Scientist at the German Center for Integration and Migration Research and a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Mannheim. Prof. Isani completed his doctorate in Political Science at the University of Muenster, a Masters in Political Science at The Ohio State University, a Masters in International Affairs at Marquette University and a Bachelors in Political Science and Economics at the Illinois Wesleyan University. Furthermore, he has undergone various trainings in data analysis at Nuffield College at the University of Oxford, University of Michigan, Syracuse University, University of Houston and Waseda University in Tokyo. He has published articles in top journals such as Public Opinion Quarterly, Political Research Quarterly, International Political Science Review, and Contemporary Review of the Middle East. He has a solo-authored book published by Palgrave Macmillan and a co-authored book published by Routledge. He serves as a member of the steering committee of the Arab-German Young Academy (AGYA) at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of the Sciences and a member of the Global Young Academy (GYA) at the German National Academy of the Sciences Leopoldina.