



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

K n o w l e d g e f o r A l l

16th Gulf Research Meeting

Cambridge, 21-23 July 2026

Workshop No. 11

The GCC and Infrastructure Connectivity in the Changing Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Landscape

1. Directors

Tim Niblock

Chair Professor in the Institute for International and Area Studies at Tsinghua University, and Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter

Degang Sun

Professor of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, and Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Talmiz Ahmad

Former Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE, and Chair Professor, Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune, India

2. Abstract

The Gulf is located at a crucial juncture connecting three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. It is also a geographical hub linking the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Persian Gulf. The Gulf states are leading investors in critical infrastructure around the world and have become prominent in markets spanning from East Asia, South-East Asia, South Asia, Africa, Central Asia to Europe. At the new age of re-globalisation and with the surge of the Global South, the Gulf countries are reshaping global, regional, and local infrastructure interconnectivity.

3. Context

At the global level, China, the largest trading partner and the largest oil-importer of the Gulf, is engaging the Gulf through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has entered the second phase of “high-quality development”. As of 2025, all the Gulf countries have signed MOU with China on BRI Cooperation. China is fostering its infrastructure investment in the Gulf, including railways, seaports, smart cities, and 5G infrastructure. China is also making use of its geographical location to integrate the Gulf and Asia-Pacific economies through regionalisation initiatives, such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and China-GCC Strategic Dialogue. China is proactive in building, operating, and investing in over a dozen commercial seaports, industrial parks, and high-tech zones along the maritime Silk Road with the Gulf as the centrepiece. China and other Asia-Pacific countries are collectively promoting the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS for Eurasian infrastructure interconnectivity, represented by China-Europe Railway Express and China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. India is also promoting interconnectivity with the Gulf through various mechanisms. With substantial political and economic ties across Asia and Western states, led by the US, India highlights that it bridges the “Global West” with the “Global South”. While India is a member of the Indo-Pacific QUAD, the India Israel-UAE-US (I2U2), and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), it has also institutionalised its relations with its Asian neighbours through entities such as BIMSTEC, SCO, BRICS, and the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity, which sets out the roadmap for long-term Asia-Indian Ocean-Gulf engagement.

The US is upset with infrastructure interconnectivity between non-Western powers and the Gulf, particularly China. Its strategic concern is largely directed at curbing China’s increasing regional influence and promoting the so-called “Asianisation of the Gulf.” In May 2025, US President Trump embarked on a visit to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to boost traditional and new infrastructure investment between the US and the Gulf countries. To balance Asian powers’ geo-economic influence, the G7 Proposed “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment” (PGII), which aimed to promote interconnectivity with developing countries, including the Gulf states.

Although Russia is engaged in a prolonged war with Ukraine, it is also interested in infrastructure interconnectivity with Central Asia and the Gulf: the Russia-proposed International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has a far-reaching impact on the Gulf infrastructure connectivity. Besides, Russia wants to promote interconnectivity with the Gulf countries through multilateral platforms, such as the SCO and the BRICS. At the

regional level, Middle powers in West Asia are also consolidating infrastructure interconnectivity through various corridors and initiatives. Turkey launched the Middle Corridor and Asia Anew Initiative to connect the Republic with Iraq and GCC countries; Central Asian countries strive to extend their railway, highway, and information super highway networks with the GCC countries; Iran is promoting regional integration with the Gulf countries after Israeli attacks on Iran in June 2025 and on Qatar in September 2025; Iraq has been integrated into the GCC power grid system to obtain sufficient electricity supply.

Asian countries are also active. The Asia-Pacific region accounts for approximately the same share of the world economy as the G7 and its contribution to world economic growth will constantly increase in the future. The Asia-Pacific is increasingly dependent on the Gulf energy supply. Countries in East and Southeast Asia, as well as Oceania, are “looking west”; countries in West Asia are “looking east,” enhancing the cohesion of “Asianess.” South-East Asian nations are fostering resilience of infrastructure interconnectivity with the GCC countries through the mechanism of ASEAN-GCC-China Summit.

At the local level, the GCC countries are seeking infrastructure interconnectivity for better internal economic and political circulation. On the one hand, they promote interconnectivity of the intra-GCC railways, highways, airlines, seaports, logistics, as well as free flow of people; on the other hand, they foster new infrastructure interconnectivity, such as AI, big data, cyber, information, and knowledge with each other to make the GCC a locomotive of innovation. In a word, infrastructure interconnectivity, both traditional and new, is shaping the GCC countries’ global, regional, and local supply chains and value chains. However, current research in the field is scant. This workshop aims to fill the gap and offer academic and policy recommendations for the Gulf countries.

4. Paper Focus/Topics

- Global Value Chains and the Gulf countries’ logistic strategies;
- Great power competition and their potential threats to the logistic and corridor rivalries in the Gulf;
- The rise of Asian economies and Asian countries’ infrastructure investments in the Gulf;
- The new infrastructure and geopolitical and geo-economic implications to the Gulf;
- The Gaza crisis, the Red Sea crisis, the Iranian nuclear issue, and their impact on maritime security of the Gulf;
- The BRI, PGII, I2U2, INSTC, the IMEC, the SCO, the BRICS, and other institutional rivalries in the Gulf;

- Middle Powers' proposals for infrastructure interconnectivity, such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt;
- China and US high-tech competition in the Gulf and its impact on new infrastructure interconnectivity of the Gulf;
- Traditional and new infrastructure interconnectivity between Central Asia, South-East Asia, South Asia, and West Asia;
- Land, maritime, and logistic interconnectivity of the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea;
- Infrastructure interconnectivity and its implications on the Gulf countries' regional integration;
- Infrastructure financing and its implications on the Gulf regionalisation.

5. Publication Plans

The three workshop directors are all the editorial board members of the Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. In the past six years, all the selected papers have been published as special issues of Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, a double-blind review journal (indexed as ESCI). We will select quality papers for a special issue of the Journal. Papers that cannot fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

6. References

1. Samad, Wael A. and Elie Azar, *Smart Cities in the Gulf: Current State, Opportunities, and Challenges*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
2. Al-Sabah, Meshal, "Intangible Infrastructure of the GCC: Bridging the Divide," *Global Society*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2014, pp. 151-157.
3. WEI, Min, "China-Middle East Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure under the Framework of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2017, pp. 22-34.
4. Schillinger, J., & Özerol, G., "For Better or Worse: the Influence of Conflict-driven Decentralization on the Resilience of Urban Water Supply Infrastructure in the Middle East," *Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2024, pp. 1-21.
5. Niblock, Tim, Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (eds), *Conflict Resolution and Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2017.
6. Niblock, Tim, Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun (eds), *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes*, Berlin: Gerlach, 2018.
7. Proń, Elżbieta, *International Institutions in China's Foreign Policy: The Case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Torun: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2021.
8. Sim, Li-Chen, and Jonathan Fulton, *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security*, London and New York: Routledge, 2023.

9. Sun, Degang, et. al, China's Holistic Diplomacy towards the Arab Countries: A Perspective of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Seoul: Xinxing Publisher, 2024.
10. Rizzi, A., "The Infinite Connection: How to Make the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor Happen," Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 April 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/theinfinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>.
11. Janardhan, Narayanappa and Gedaliah Afterman, "I2U2: India's Diplomatic Tool for a Changing World Order," US Institute of Peace, February 3, 2025 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2025/02/i2u2-indiasdiplomatic-tool-changing-world-order>.
12. Trubina, Elina, David Gogishvili, Nadja Imhof & Martin Müller, "A Part of the World or Apart from the World? The Postsocialist Global East in the Geopolitics of Knowledge," Eurasian Geography and Economics, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2020, pp. 636-662.
13. Zoubir, Yahia H., Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa, London and New York.

7. Workshop Directors

Tim Niblock is Chair Professor in the Institute for International and Area Studies at Tsinghua University, and Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He has held the position of Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies (2009-2014), Vice-Chair of the UK Council of Area Studies Associations (2010-2014), and Vice-President of the British Society for Middle East Studies (2009-2012). He was the founding Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He has previously served at the University of the University of Reading and the University of Durham. Between 1969 and 1977, he was Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Khartoum.

Among his published books are: *The Gulf States, Asia and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes* (edited with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun, 2018); *Conflict Resolution and the Creation of a Security Community in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun); *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region* (edited, with Yang Guang, 2014); *Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century. The Local to Global Transformation* (edited, with Monica Malik, 2013), *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (2007), *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (2006), 'Pariah States' and Sanctions in the Middle East: *Iraq, Libya and Sudan* (2001), *Class and Power in Sudan* (1987), *Iraq: the Contemporary State* (edited, 1982), *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (edited, 1981), and *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf* (edited, 1980).

Talmiz Ahmad joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1974 and was posted to Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen, and then as Consul General in Jeddah, in 1987-90. After appointments in New York, London and Pretoria, he became the head of the Gulf and Hajj Division in the Ministry of External Affairs in 1998-2000. He did two stints as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, besides being ambassador to Oman and the UAE, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, and Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

After retirement from foreign service in 2011, he was in the corporate sector in Dubai. Since 2016, he has been a full-time academic. He holds the Ram Sathe Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune. He has authored four books: *Reform in the Arab World: External Influences and Regional Debates* (2005); *Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarisms* (2010); *The Islamist Challenge in West Asia: Doctrinal and Political Competitions after the Arab Spring* (2013). His latest book, *West Asia at War: Repression, Resistance and Great Power Games*, was published in April 2022. He writes and lectures regularly on political Islam, the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, and energy security issues.

Degang Sun is Professor of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, and Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He was Deputy Director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, China, and he was a visiting scholar at Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (September 2018-September 2019), and Senior Associate Member at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, and an Academic Visitor to Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013), Denver University (2007-2008), and Hong Kong University (2004-2005). His research interests are Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations, Great Powers' Strategies in the Middle East, and China's Middle East Diplomacy. He has published over 50 papers in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Mediterranean Politics*, *Middle East Policy*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *China: An International Journal*, and *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. His latest book is *China's Holistic Diplomacy Towards the Arab Countries: A Perspective of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum* (Seoul: Xinxing Publisher, 2024).