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Philippine-Middle East Relations: Prospects and Challenges amidst ASEAN and China Engagement

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Abstract

The countries in the Persian Gulf highly intertwined with the global economy. Given its strategic location and abundance of resources, the Persian Gulf countries (GCC) is expected to play a critical role in the future economic direction and stability of the Middle East and Asian region. Liberal reforms instituted by GCC such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other non-traditional partners wield significant influence. This development calls for a re-evaluation of policies by regional actors and domineering global powers with a stake in the region such as the United States (US). These GCC reforms open a new round of opportunities for countries in the Global South, particularly ASEAN member like Philippines. This paper seeks to evaluate the ongoing economic and geopolitical transformation in the Persian Gulf amid growing Chinese presence and GCC regimes' economic reforms. Furthermore, this paper poses question, how the Philippines can use an independent foreign policy and take advantage of the changing political-economy landscape in the Middle East. This further suggest that the time is ripe for the Philippines to rethink its strategic policy toward the GCC and the Middle East to maximize gains outside of the US alliance system.

Keywords: Philippines Interest, GCC, Strategic Policy, China, Arab Reforms, ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

The strategic value attached to the Middle East in which the Persian Gulf Littoral States are part of since time immemorial has been the centrifugal factor why the world continues to engage the region until today. The region is not only important in terms of its socio-religion and historical components where Abrahamic beliefs namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated, but its geography, mineral resources including the crude oil and gas also figured out as equality relevant assets that region hold. These assets are not only important to the well-being of regional states but given its strategic importance in feeding world industrialization and modernization projects, the Middle East region will continue to be the arena of regional and international resource rivalries and cooperation. From 1950 till 2000s, series of wars and hostilities over control of territories and resources are recorded in the region. The region witnessed the series of Israeli-Arab wars, Iranian revolution and Iran-Iraq War in the 1970 to 1988, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, as well as the recent Israeli military war on Gaza. All these would described the ugly side of the region throughout decades. However, one may may also observe that the dynamics of the region does not evolve solely from its negativity but also from its

positive developmental component in some other parts of the Middle East region such as that being experienced by some Persian Gulf littoral states, namely the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and even Iran. While Yemen remains in political and economic difficulties, Iraq is now catching up from the 1996 American invasion and the eventual Arab Spring that destroyed much of its economy, while Iran although has experienced the impact of the United States unilateral sanctions, is able to somewhat diversify its economy to minimize impact on its economy.

As rivalries, war, suspicious and hostilities that described much of Persian Gulf countries relation in the previous decades, the last decades saw a gradual economic diversification and transformation in some leading Persian Gulf countries. Not only that these countries become successful in turning their rent-centric economic system into a liberal open market economy, but they have also started instituting socio-economic and political reforms necessary for future survival. These countries realized that their oil and gas will not infinitely bring them revenue, hence, their leaders started to work and transform their economies from massive to less reliance on crude oil and gas. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have seriously pursued its Vision 2031 aimed at reforming their economies, while Qatar, Bahrain, including Oman, pursued a balance economic diversification by maintaining much of the cultural component of this reform. The significant move to transform the socioeconomic well-being of these economies suggested also the need to diversify foreign policy and trade options. This has affected to some extent political alliances with international powers. The aggressive economic and development policy of China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appealed much to the Arab and non-Arab Middle East countries. Given the geostrategic importance of the Persian Gulf countries to the success of BRI, China strikes strategic and comprehensive partnership with some of the Persian Gulf countries.

In line of these geopolitical adjustment and economic reforms in the Persian Gulf countries, ASEAN and the Philippines can benefit a lot from them. Given the cultural - religious connection of some ASEAN member states to the Middle East it will be good to see much more improve relations in various areas of collaboration. Perhaps one of them could be the Arab investment opportunities. The Philippines, although traditionally been sending millions of workers to the region particularly in the Persian Gulf countries, the new regional development could offer a fresh momentum for the country to start diversifying areas of interest's vis -a-vis the region.

For the Philippines, the conduct of its diplomatic concentration with the Middle East region in general and Persian Gulf countries in particular relied on OFWs, oil importation and the good offices provided by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) since the mid-1970s onward. Like many countries in the Asia and the Pacific region that relied much from the Persian Gulf crude oil, some ASEAN non- energy rich country like Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines have always been exposed to Middle East geopolitical tension and war. Of prime importance, the area in which this impact is seen is in crude oil supply coming from the Middle East region.

The significant energy reserves in the Persian Gulf gives us a clear idea of its importance not only economically but also strategically. Given their resources and wealth, Gulf countries are potential sources of financial investment not only for Africa but also for Asia and the Pacific, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). They are relevant to the stability of the Middle East in particular and the world in general, as oil flows influence the power dynamics among regional and international actors. For ASEAN countries like the Philippines, the Gulf presents an opportunity to look beyond traditional allies like China and the US and beyond traditional areas of cooperation.

The Philippines, like the rest of ASEAN, needs to re-evaluate its policies and approaches toward the Middle East. Relations with the region shall be regarded not just from the traditional modes of transaction—oil importation, foreign labor deployment, Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) facilitation, and good offices—but also in view of possible gains from interconnected development with the Philippines and ASEAN. Since the 1970s, ASEAN countries have not been able to maximize relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and energy-rich Iran, also a littoral state in the Persian Gulf. The right strategy and approach to the GCC countries and Iran in the past years has not yet been fully developed by Southeast Asian countries including the Philippines. Furthermore, the Gulf countries' foreign and trade policy orientation in the past was centered on improving relations with Western economies, particularly with the US and Europe. This myopia from both sides explains the relatively unexplored bilateral relations between the Philippines and ASEAN countries with GCC member states.

Recent developments in Asia and the Pacific have, however, shifted the focus of the GCC toward the region, including ASEAN. GCC foreign investment using sovereign wealth ownership has redirected toward ASEAN countries in recent years. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have increased their investment in the region, particularly Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. A record of 59 deals concerning GCC investment have been tallied in Southeast Asia from the period 2022–23, an increase from only seven deals in the years 2018–19. The reorientation of GCC policy vis-à-vis Asia, the rise of China, Southeast Asia's abundance in natural resources, and the region's friendly reception of Arab investment are all contributing to the increasing rate of economic interaction between GCC countries and ASEAN countries. However, even with these ripe conditions in place, the opportunity has yet to be fully taken advantage of by most Southeast Asian countries.

In a joint statement released by ASEAN and GCC in the Summit in Riyadh on 20 October 2023, the regional blocks agreed to use bilateral and multilateral channels to leverage growth and development opportunities through collaboration in the areas of food, energy, and water security, green and renewable energy resources, technological innovation, and people-to-people relations. An increasing number of Arab tourists have been visiting ASEAN countries in the past years. In an article published by ASEAN Post in 2019, three Southeast Asian countries were included in the 10 Mastercard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) in 2018. These were Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. This ranking signified the relevance of these three countries as an Islamic tourism hub for Muslim populations around the world.

Muslim ASEAN countries may have vibrant relations with the Middle East, but the rest like the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have yet to see the region as a crucial part of their developmental strategy. In the case of the Philippines, good and cordial relations have been maintained with Middle Eastern countries for the past years. However, its ability to fully craft a strategic policy vis-à-vis the region beyond the American alliance system and its traditional transactions of “three Os” (oil, OFWs, and OIC) has not really been fully appreciated. On a positive note, there are welcome developments in the tourism sector. Visits to the Philippines from Saudi Arabia were recorded to top in the list of tourism from the Middle East, with at least 43,748 arrivals in 2019. With the formalized agreement for tourism development between the Philippines and Saudi Arabia, visits to and from both countries are expected to rise significantly.

The increasing engagement of China with the Global South and the reforms being implemented by GCC governments have helped open a new era of international relations in which the Philippines and other ASEAN countries could engage more freely and strategically with the GCC for developmental projects. In saying that, ASEAN countries must do a careful calculation to elevate their partnerships with GCC countries. They must ensure that their policy approaches align with their national interests and capitalize on their own economic and geographical attributes as well as those of their GCC partners. New economic potentials present in the GCC can be explored to advance ASEAN and Philippine interests. Thus, they must not depend on an alliance with either China or the US. ASEAN could take advantage of the economic incentives present in China-GCC relations and US-GCC relations without necessarily relying on a close alliance with either power. Only through an independent foreign policy could ASEAN member countries serve their national interests and not get entangled in the major powers’ geopolitical rivalry.

In sum, due to the economic and strategic values attached to the GCC, it is important for ASEAN countries to approach the region from a pragmatic perspective—balancing realist and liberalist ideals. State actors protect their national security, but they also cooperate to maintain relative peace and stability. They pursue their own economic interests, but they also interact in the liberal and market spheres where the interdependency of suppliers and consumers is the norm. This situation describes the current state of Persian Gulf countries’ relations with the wider Middle East region and the world. Hence, the confluence of states’ national interests and their need to cooperate is the main factor that should be analyzed when formulating plans and policies vis-à-vis the region.

DISCUSSION

Philippine Independent Foreign Policy

This paper will use the independent foreign policy perspective in determining the move of the Philippine to expand areas of collaboration with the Persian Gulf countries and the Middle East in general. In doing so, a qualitative analysis and interpretation of data and policies is touched upon to explain relational trends of the country vis-a-vis the

region in line with regional development as well as with ASEAN and China's increasing engagement towards the region.

Ideally and in principle, the Philippine constitution in Article, Section VII, clearly states that "The State shall pursue an independent foreign policy. In its relations with other states, the paramount consideration shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination" (1987 Philippine Constitution - The LawPhil Project). It is a collective articulation of domestic necessities and interests and are expressed through its foreign trade, political and economic policies. However, in practice, the said independent foreign policy was only expressed in rhetoric and is not really followed in good faith. This limitation is more or less visible in geopolitical and security but also in economic and trade realms. With this, it is important to understand factors that restrict the country from exercising a real independent foreign policy.

Colonial history, Alliance with big powers and powers constrain to project its national interests before the international community are three critical factors that prevented the Philippines from exercising its independent foreign policy since its 1946 independence. These factors not only described vividly the country's conduct of international relations throughout the decades but also determined much the dependency of the country as well as constraints in addressing much of the larger issues facing our very own national interests. The country's colonial history has not only privileged the same traditional family elites as well as perceptions of many western produced scholars but also how they have prioritized the country's interests in each geopolitical, cultural and economic environment.

The second factor which described the relationship of the country with the big powers particularly with the United States has sustained this colonial legacy. Moreover, the geopolitical bipolarity that defined much the relationships of the states since the beginning of the Cold War onward did not only strengthen Philippine dependency with the United States but also constrained the country's foreign policy option. While the first two variables are important, the third variable on limited power capability to project an independent foreign policy priorities overseas legitimize priorities set forth by the first and second factors. Thus, constraining the country from exercising the true meaning of an independent foreign policy.

As for the purpose of this paper, the independent foreign policy is defined in terms of the ability of the Philippines to strike a well-defined priority based on existing national interests and not something defined and set forth by other influential country or group of countries for the Philippine to give higher priority. It is based on the collective aspiration of the Filipino people and expressed through various areas such as political, security, economic, sociocultural, including humanitarian and environmental domains. Its primary purpose is to articulate these interests in the higher form of consideration in bilateral, regional, and multilateral platforms depending on the needs being articulated. Given this operational definition, the Philippines has been successful in laying down an independent policy in terms of its decision to prepare the legal ground works for standardizing the labor

laws and policies, but it lacks the ability to completely impact or influence other countries. In geopolitical aspect, the Philippines having been allied of the United States could not position itself politically in the Middle East region to make a significant impact without considering its allied interests. It is unable to genuinely pursue an independent foreign policy in terms of maintaining relations with the non-US friendly Middle East countries in general.

The recent political and economic development in the Persian Gulf Region however and the Persian Gulf diversification movement to accommodate China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and these countries policy to boast economic and trade cooperation with East Asia have opened a great deal of opportunities for the Philippines to make some momentum of this recent development. The signing of Abraham Accord between Israel and some Arab countries may also aid in improving trade and labor transactions between the Philippines and regional countries. The rapprochement between Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and latter's vision to reform its economy could further increase the Philippines opportunity to diversify relations with the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf littoral states in particular. However, this will require a political will to go beyond the usual practice of alliance with western powers as well as determination to really improve relations with Persian Gulf littoral states amid the changing geopolitical and economy landscape.

The Changing Geopolitical and Economic Landscape of the GCC

In crafting a strategic policy toward the Middle East in general and GCC countries in particular, the Philippines and the rest of ASEAN must study and understand the changing geopolitical and economic realities occurring in the region today. As the GCC is highly intertwined with the global economy and as the Middle East is crucial in international security and power dynamics, failure to appreciate these transformations will limit their policy options in dealing with the region along with their ability to seize economic, security, and political opportunities. For the Philippines, developing regional engagements considering geopolitical and economic transformations in the GCC and the Middle East is a strategic necessity. The country's official engagement with the Middle East started in the 1970s. Philippine relations with the region today should have already matured, meaning areas of cooperation should have expanded from the usual oil, OFW, and OIC elements. However, this is not the case. The Philippines and ASEAN should look at the region from the perspective of a comprehensive strategic partnership.

The succeeding discussions will deal with the recent regional geopolitical and economic developments in the Middle East region, namely 1) the power vacuum and the emergence of China as a regional and global power; 2) the newly-signed peace agreements (the Abraham Accords) and the prospects of boosting economic and trade relations; 3) the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement; 4) the foreign policy pragmatism of regional countries and the liberal reforms instituted by leading GCC economies; and 5) the formation of new regional alliances and policy directions. The recent Israeli war on Gaza shall not be discussed in detail in this article, as it deserves to have a study of its own. In view of these geopolitical shifts, it is important that ASEAN and the Philippines can reconfigure their

policies vis-à-vis the region to take advantage of opportunities while minimizing risks and costs emanating from possible US-China rivalries.

Balance of Power in the Middle East

China's interaction with Arabs and Iranians and vice versa did not start recently. It is a relationship that was built and nurtured for centuries. However, recent bilateral relations seem to be significantly hyperactive compared to how they were from the 1960s until the 1980s. China's economic rise and its grandiose development policy overseas under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) coincided with the decline of American engagement in the region and the Arabs' search for new strategic partnerships without much political and economic pressure. Scholars observe that on the basis of "economic foundation" and shared "normative solidarity," China and countries in the Middle East have found a level of kinship that Arabs were not able to find with the West. From its status as a peripheral power to its meteoric rise, China's entry into the Middle East region signals some kind of "systemic shift" for the region (Ehteshami *et al.*, 2023). It can be argued that throughout the decades, the region has been within the sphere of influence of the West, particularly the US. The 1953 coup against elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh—the leading figure in the nationalization of Iran's oil industry—is widely believed to have been instigated by the US and UK governments (MNA, 2023). Since then, the US has consistently intervened in national and regional affairs of Middle Eastern countries, both through official and covert channels.

The US' consistent interventionist policy has sidelined other regional powers' influence in the region, although during the Cold War the Soviet Union also demonstrated sway over some Arab countries. The collapse of the bipolar world order gave way to US domination in global and regional affairs. Despite being the last hegemonic power standing in the region, the US gradually disengaged following the Arab Spring in the 2010s and the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021. The US-Taliban peace agreement signed on 29 February 2020 marked the withdrawal of US troops and the end of its 20-year war in Afghanistan (Commuri, 2023). The Trump administration shifted US foreign policy focus to China and the Asia Pacific. The Biden administration has continued this policy direction (Commuri, 2023). The resultant power vacuum in the Middle East region coincided with China's rise as an economic and military power. Hence, China's entry into the region as an alternative power was just at the right time. Although the US is still maintaining a presence in the region, the distant policy orientation of the Trump and Biden administrations has allowed GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE to diversify partners. China is considered a viable alternative that could restore the balance of power in the region. GCC countries are hoping that China could fill the regional power vacuum, especially in light of the perceived threat from Iran.

The Abraham Accords

The second major geopolitical development that ASEAN and the Philippines must consider is the signing of the US-facilitated peace agreement between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The normalization of Israel's bilateral relations with these

countries may not guarantee peace and stability in the region, but it promises to facilitate the eased mobility of people and goods from the countries of origin to Israel and vice versa, passing through airports and terminals located in the UAE. Indonesia and Malaysia are not receptive of the Accords, as they believe that peace and regional stability could not be achieved without addressing the Israel-Palestine issue and protecting the rights of the Palestinians. China and India, however, are potential beneficiaries of the Accords. Similarly, the Philippines, given the large number of its OFWs in the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, is expected to benefit from this development. The Philippines can take advantage of the easier mobility and transactions by utilizing the UAE's terminals and ports for its tourism campaign and trade engagements.

The Saudi – Iranian Rapprochement

Another geopolitical development that will no doubt shape regional dynamics is the normalization of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two powerful countries in the Persian Gulf. Both have considerable energy and mineral reserves, and both are leaders in the propagation of their versions of Islam, Sunni for Saudi Arabia and Shi'a for Iran. This difference in Islamic belief and teaching has divided them for many centuries, making them ideological and geopolitical rivals in the region. The normalization of their bilateral ties is based not only on the mutual intention to mend their relationship but also on pragmatic considerations regarding their economic and political visions. It is a response to a common understanding that a *détente* would ultimately serve their interests and priorities. For Saudi Arabia, having peace with Iran is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to transform the country to a diverse and competitive economy. From the perspective of Islamic Iran, the rapprochement would foster greater regional unity amid continued US presence. Iran understands that US-Saudi Arabia security and defense cooperation is robust and will likely continue in the coming years. That Iran could maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia despite its close partnership with the US suggests that both countries share many common interests for regional growth and stability.

ASEAN and the Philippines should look at these opportunities and engage more with Iran and Saudi Arabia, both in the socio-cultural and religious spheres as well as in the more practical and functional areas of cooperation namely trade, tourism, investment, human resource development, and technological exchange. Moreover, the recent rapprochement is a positive step towards securing relative regional peace and understanding not only among regional countries but also the larger Muslim ummah. As the prominent leaders of the Islamic world, the normalization of Saudi Arabia-Iran ties will help strengthen unity among Muslims and address socio-cultural, economic, political, environmental, and security challenges commonly faced by these countries. As a non-western country, China's facilitation of the rapprochement indicates its acceptability as a power balancer in regional affairs. China's role is also expected to increase in the geopolitical and economic landscapes of the region.

Foreign Policy Pragmatism of Middle Eastern Countries

The geopolitical discussion above brings us to the political and economic side of regional development. The peace agreement and geopolitical accommodation among regional actors is a precursor to a successful regional economic project especially in the GCC region. Countries in the GCC have long realized the importance of pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy toward each other. Although the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain have somewhat opened their economies and instituted labor reforms to meet the demand for liberalization, other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and even Iran are still in the early phase of liberalizing their economic sectors.

Today, Saudi Arabia is embarking on several reforms through its Saudi Vision 2030. Within this framework, Saudi Arabia is seeking to achieve the following goals: to become 1) a “vibrant society” by ensuring cultural heritage preservation, promoting larger female participation in society, and providing wider access to medical benefits; 2) a “thriving economy” which cultivates a conducive business environment and facilitates educational trainings; and 3) an “ambitious nation” which aims at promoting efficiency, accountability, and transparency at all levels (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Just like Saudi Arabia, the UAE’s Vision 2030 is also targeted to achieve “economic balance” by giving equal emphasis on growth and sustainability, i.e., pledging to follow the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and decrease dependency on fossil fuels (Go Globe, 2024).

One may note that the driving force behind these reforms are the countries’ strong leadership. In this context, ASEAN and the Philippines could take advantage of the current reform-minded GCC regimes and instigate government-to-government initiatives in line with their Vision 2030. ASEAN and the Philippines can tap these GCC countries as part of their strategic direction. Given Southeast Asian human and natural resources such as agricultural and marine products and young and dynamic populations, their involvement in these countries’ vision for the future will prove to be valuable.

New Regional Alliances

Lastly, in the advent of minimized US engagement in Middle Eastern affairs and China’s hyperactive regional presence, there seems to be an observable formation of new geopolitical and economic alliances involving GCC countries and the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. BRICS countries wield massive economic influence; they hold a wealth of human resources and energy and mineral reserves necessary to run the global economy. Recently, BRICS has inducted Middle Eastern and East African countries to become its full members. These countries are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia. With their inclusion, BRICS has expanded its representation to 45 percent of the world population and its investible wealth to USD45 trillion (Henley & Partners, 2024). The inclusion of Middle Eastern countries to BRICS will not only alter the global economic system traditionally controlled by Western institutions, but it could also reveal a strategic political alliance in the coming years. Indeed, BRICS is expected to become a powerful non-western economic and political alliance, potentially challenging the existing global world order with its ambitious diplomatic goals.

Convergence of Interests between GCC, ASEAN, and China

Members of ASEAN and GCC share common interests. These shared interests, however, have not been fully explored in the past as both groups demonstrated different patterns and levels of regionalism and development. Hence, their orientation and priorities also differ from one another. In the past decades, the GCC had been too occupied with consolidating a regional economic bloc—an idea that has been partially achieved since its inception in 1981. Competing national interests as well as rivalries for regional ascendancy and power has slowed down cooperation over the past decades. On the other hand, ASEAN, since its creation in 1967, has somewhat achieved a different model of regionalism based on the “ASEAN way.” It is a successful regional organization in terms of decreasing regional tension. And while ASEAN is considered as a talking shop by some observers, it is quite successful in providing an avenue for dialogue both for member states and for other non-ASEAN regional states. As the two organizations now function with a liberal market orientation,

ASEAN and GCC must establish a strong economic, political, and security relationship. This proposition is based on a fact that if both were to carve the future direction of their states and economies based on the undergoing trends in the world, they must start to recognize the convergence of their interests and work toward sustainable economic growth and development. That said, ASEAN and GCC need to discover where they can work effectively with each other while safeguarding their organizations and members’ interests. ASEAN-GCC potential areas of cooperation are in the sectors of trade and investment, food security, tourism, and energy (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). In fact, all GCC member countries have accredited their ambassadors to ASEAN, while ASEAN established committees in GCC member states’ capitals such as in Manama, Muscat, Doha, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Despite the turbulent regional environment in the Middle East amid the Israeli war on Gaza, GCC and ASEAN were driven and determined to further elevate these relationships to the highest level. Thus, the two organizations have convened in a Summit in Riyadh on 20 October 2023. Accordingly, ASEAN-GCC economic ties have soared with the combined gross domestic product of nearly USD6 trillion (Ali, 2023). GCC and ASEAN can collaborate and learn from one another, most importantly in maritime security, terrorism response, resource security, sustainable economic growth and development, human resource and technological exchange, and even in terms of maintaining regional peace.

Maritime Security

The increasing economic exchanges between China, ASEAN, and GCC will require a close policy coordination among state parties. Coordination of policies regarding trade, banking, insurance, and supply production is the most critical component of a successful trading partnership. Participating countries must realize that each party should be ready and flexible to accommodate each other’s requests and policies based on the agreed upon mutual gains to facilitate smooth trade and economic transactions. Moreover, one area where China, ASEAN, and GCC need to coordinate and manage is maritime security, given their contiguous borders and common trade routes. Because Southeast Asia’s

geography is based mainly on maritime features and the most efficient way to transport tradeable goods between China, ASEAN, and GCC is through sea routes, it is urgent that activities in these areas must be jointly facilitated and monitored. Several maritime challenges can be enumerated to support the call for maritime coordination and cooperation. One threat can emanate from possible piracy attacks in The Malacca Strip as well as the larger areas connecting North Africa and Middle East, specifically the Gulf of Eden. Another threat comes from incidents related to territorial disputes between sovereign countries in the Asia Pacific and the Middle East. Lastly, a common threat is the environmental or technical hazards brought about by vessels loaded with tradeable goods. Coordinating maritime policies and maintaining open lines of communication will ensure that vital sea lanes are free from hazards and security threats. Doing this is not only practical for smooth international commerce but also for the safe movement of people.

There are at least ten maritime areas in the world that are considered vulnerable to piracy. These are The Malacca Straits, the South China Sea, the Gulf of Eden, the Gulf of Guinea, Benin, Nigeria, Somalia, Indonesia, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean (Kaushik, 2021). A report from the International Chamber of Commerce's (ICC) International Maritime Bureau (IMB) shows that piracy attacks in the world in 2023 has significantly increased by 10 percent in the first nine months of the year—99 incidents, compared to 90 in 2022. The third quarter of 2023 has alarmingly seen more piracy incidents in the areas of Guinea, the Callao anchorage in Peru, and the Singapore Strait and Southeast Asia, with an increased number of ships' crew held hostage during the attacks (Maritime Executive, 2023). Somalia is known as one of the most dangerous areas for commercial trade. However, one must also look at the piracy issue in Southeast Asia. The Strait of Malacca is "one of the world's busiest commercial sea-lanes," with more than 40 percent of oil and gas supplies passing this route (The Jakarta Post, 2023). Another IMB report concluded that in 2015, 55 percent of total recorded world piracy and armed robbery incidents occurred in Southeast Asia (Southgate, 2015). Thus, the region has once again been hailed as the "world's number one piracy trouble spot" (Southgate, 2015). Out of the 99 reported piracy incidents globally in 2023, 53 took place in Southeast Asia—33 of which occurred in the Singapore Strait. IMB also noted that 25 percent of the attacks happened in the month of July (Maritime Executive, 2023).

The issue of maritime and territorial disputes, although confined to the parties directly involved, may also have wider implication to maritime southeast Asia as well as to volatile West Asia, especially regarding the preservation of relative peace and stability. Chinese assertive actions in the South China Sea may have international implications, if it is not managed by parties involved. Due to the South China Sea's strategic value, any push from China to assert its claims and occupy disputed territories may force other powers to participate in the security and geopolitical competition, possibly exposing the region to security threats and foreign intervention. In the same manner, if the UAE and Iran are unable to manage through diplomacy their claims over the Islands in the Strait of Hormuz—the Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs—it will also create a volatile environment for both countries and possibly disturb commercial activities within the Gulf (Al-Nahyan, 2013). The international value attached to the South China Sea and the

Persian Gulf, particularly in the conduct of stable commercial and trade transactions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East, should not be underestimated by the parties involved. Apart from trade and security threats, technical and environmental disasters in the maritime routes between Asia and the Middle East also necessitate coordination and cooperation between countries in the region. Given these mutual concerns and interests, China, ASEAN, and GCC must ensure that amid political misunderstanding and differences, joint management and monitoring of commercial activities within their territories must be given high consideration.

Anti-Terrorism

It is well acknowledged in international politics as well as in international security studies that terrorism activities are threats to development, stability, and security. Unlawful elements tend to disrupt the status quo and sabotage projects and initiatives that run counter to their ideological beliefs, posing risks to a nation's development and more critically, damaging the lives of civilians who have always been the primary victims of their brutal activities. Recent decades have witnessed how terrorist groups driven by radical ideology inflicted chaos and instability in several nations in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Many of the groups in Southeast Asia are allegedly influenced by Islamic radical groups originating from the wider Middle East and may have been exports from the region. Although these terrorist groups falsely claim their struggle to be a religious cause, their unlawful activities are mainly a reactionary against the spread of capitalism and Western dominance in several countries in Asia, which for them are toxic and damage their own traditional values and cultures.

The sustainability of the development trajectories of China and countries in ASEAN and GCC necessitates a comprehensive strategic partnership among concerned parties to collectively address challenges related to trade transactions, human mobility, and maritime security—all of which are threatened by international terrorism. A robust anti-terrorism campaign requires strong cooperation and a multi-level approach. In light of the increasing enthusiasm in economic and political engagements between the countries in GCC, ASEAN, and China, the drive to facilitate a steadfast anti-terrorism response is evident and may bear fruit in the coming years. Understanding the nature and the extent to which terrorist groups can operate, ASEAN is the first international body to "have developed a comprehensive convention countering terrorism" (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2011). Recognizing deep historical and cultural ties between ASEAN and GCC, the two regional bodies on 28 September 2019 agreed to forge a "closer inter-regional collaboration in addressing common challenges," both traditional and non-traditional, such as "protectionism, terrorism and violent extremism, geopolitical conflicts, sustainable development, and climate change, among others" (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). In the 2024–28 Framework of Cooperation between GCC and ASEAN adopted in Saudi Arabia on 20 October 2023, the two international bodies also agreed share their experiences in preventing radicalism and terrorism in their respective regions (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). The traditional reliance of GCC countries on "external protection" in matters

related to external threats further highlights the need to facilitate intelligence exchanges between GCC, ASEAN, and China (Miller, 2022).

Combating Human Trafficking

In relation to the first two points mentioned, another area which GCC, ASEAN, the Philippines, and China can develop is a comprehensive international response to human trafficking and drug smuggling, which has direct relevance to the argument that maritime collaboration and strategic partnerships need to be strengthened. The two issues require different areas of expertise but are closely related, as in some case the victims of human trafficking are linked to an organized drug syndicate, whether knowingly or not. Organized drug cartels tend to use vulnerable individuals from Southeast Asian countries as mules in the sale and transportation of illegal drugs overseas. In the same manner, organized human trafficking is also caused by individuals and organizations preying on vulnerable sectors of society with promises of better work and life conditions abroad. Unlawful and inhumane activities occur at various levels and locations, such as illegal recruitment and migration, different forms of human rights abuses, prostitution, and slavery.

All of these are immediate concerns not only for the receiving and sending countries, but also for countries of transit. Although one of the most common issues faced by foreign workers in the Middle East is the traditional kafala system, this part of the article would like to focus on cross-border human trafficking and organized drug syndicates, which are more challenging to track and apprehend. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said on the 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons that in 2018, at least 40 percent of trafficked victims intercepted in the Middle East region outside of the GCC countries arrived from East Africa (UNODC, 2021). Several studies mention that Southeast Asia's refugees and displaced individuals are vulnerable to human trafficking. While this is the reality, it remains largely unreported (Caballero-Anthony, 2018). Poverty and lack of available jobs in the countryside coupled with man-made and natural security disturbances in several Southeast Asian countries that displaced civilian populations have all offered a lucrative opportunity for traffickers to recruit desperate people into slavery, prostitution, and illicit drug activities. Furthermore, recognizing the need of GCC countries to recruit foreign workers from Southeast Asia and Africa to run their homes, business centers, construction sites, and other related service industries, it is necessary to establish security and labor coordination between these countries to ensure the documented migration and protection of foreign workers as well as to ensure the stable continuity of GCC trade activities. Thus, economies in the Asia and the Pacific region that depend very much on GCC strategic sea lanes of transportation, GCC oil and gas imports, as well as GCC markets for their workers are compelled to work closely with each other to avoid, if not totally eradicate, the human and drug trafficking activities that victimize vulnerable individuals and threaten their economic and security interests.

Energy Security

Energy cooperation is another important area which China, ASEAN, and GCC can explore. Given the vibrancy of their economies and the active industrialization of the Asia and the Pacific region, there is an urgent need to collaborate to ensure energy security. Energy security entails multiple things: the security of oil and gas production and supplies from the point of extraction to delivery to the consuming economies as well as the security of financial and technological investments needed for downstream and upstream operations. From the perspective of GCC oil and gas producing countries, holding considerable resources and amassing great amounts of oil revenue are not enough. The stability of demand in the markets of consuming economies must be maintained. Hence, energy security should be viewed based on directional flows of oil and gas products from both the supply side and the demand side. China, for example, has been a net importer of crude oil from Middle East and Africa since 1993. This trend can be attributed not just to its large consumer population but also because China is now becoming the main source of capital investment and technology needed to extract oil and gas from offshore locations. China's developmental projects under the ambitious BRI has made cooperation with GCC countries more strategic compared to previous decades.

The intensity of China's engagement with a number of GCC and African countries attested to the reality of this geo-economic transformation in China and supplier countries. Whereas some ASEAN member countries also supply a considerable amount of oil and gas such as in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, others simply do not have enough reserves or the technology and hence, continue to import from the GCC region. The Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand reportedly import these energy sources from overseas. The Philippines imports mainly from the GCC, particularly crude oil from Dubai, but it also imports finished products from Singapore. Thailand also imports oil and gas from GCC countries and gets much of its renewable resources from neighboring countries like Myanmar. Singapore, although lacking the necessary domestic resources, has made itself world's largest oil terminal. Along with these developments, it is also becoming increasingly common for countries in Southeast Asia to receive Arab sovereign wealth funds. The amount of Arab financial transfers to Southeast Asia as a result of asset expansion has also increased in the recent years. GCC countries have invested in renewable sectors in Southeast Asia (Barantschik, 2023). The dynamics discussed above presents an important case for China, ASEAN, and GCC to closely collaborate with each other.

Philippine Interests and the Gulf Cooperation Council

The Philippines' policies vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly the GCC, are relevant not only to its national, bilateral, and regional interests but also to its global interests. The Philippines, although a small country and a developing economy, remains an important international player in the human and economic development of the GCC region as well as in the context of inter-regional maritime security consortium. Hence, efforts should be made at the soonest possible time to reframe the traditional perception of the Philippines that has been prevalent since the mid-1970s: that the country is primarily a supplier of human labor and an importer of energy. The

developments in the GCC region, both in terms of new emerging geopolitical alliances as well as liberalizing economic and trade directions, further strengthen our resolve to reframe the country's role in the changing trans-regionalism in the West, Southeast, and Northeast Asian regions.

Traditionally, Philippine interests in the region were bounded in terms of areas of operation and level of engagement. Philippine-Middle East relations was limited to energy security, labor interests, and international cooperation through multinational political bodies such as the OIC. Filipino leaders have conventionally perceived and presented the country within these frameworks and hence, our gains from international relations are also limited in scope. Unable to go beyond oil, OFWs, and OIC as main concerns in the region, the Philippines have missed many opportunities offered by the GCC in the past decades. The "three Os" of Philippine-Middle East or Philippine-GCC relations is very much reflective of the Republic Act No. 7157, which mandated the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to uphold the three diplomatic pillars of the country, namely the "preservation and enhancement of national security," the "promotion and attainment of economic security," and the "protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of Filipinos overseas" (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Still, the level and extent of actual articulation and implementation of these pillars in the context of Philippine relations with the region has not been fully exhausted, and points of engagement have yet to expand to other areas of interest. This would make the navigation of Philippine regional interests very difficult.

For one, we have not maximized the power of culture and public diplomacy vis-à-vis the region in the past decades or years. We have not well articulated in our communication and policy that Filipinos have made positive contribution to the development of the region. Rather, so much focus has been given to issues like the share of overseas remittances in the Philippine GDP or the experiences of OFWs who are subjected to abuse by their employees due to kafala practices. While these are indeed important issues, we have not well articulated and therefore, have unsuccessfully expanded the coverage of our trade and economic transactions with regional countries apart from the traditional activities of labor exportation and oil importation. We have not explored much how the Arab and non-Arab Middle East can be attracted to pour investment in the Philippine economy. Finally, beyond the country's willingness to maintain engagement with the Muslim world through the OIC, we have not explored security and military cooperation with them in the past decades, even as we share common concerns related to maritime and domestic security challenges.

As mentioned, all of these have led to the Philippines' relative poverty of gains and opportunities from the region in the past decades. The marginalization of its interests in the Middle East and the GCC derives from the fact that throughout the decades, the Philippines' approach to the region is very much still anchored on its Cold War belief in US supremacy over its ideological and political enemies. Hence, the US global agenda particularly in the Middle East dictated our way of communicating and cooperating with the GCC countries, especially in the areas of security and politics (Sevilla, 2020). In other words, the marginalization of Philippine interests could be attributed to the following

factors: "hegemony/orientalism, biased media reporting, US political and cultural hegemony over the Philippines, and the lack of Middle East studies programs in the Philippines" (Sevilla, 2020). These factors are apparent when one evaluates the conduct of Philippine relations with Iran in the post-Islamic Revolution period (Sevilla, 2023).

In the context of a fast-changing GCC region, the Philippines needs to refocus its goals and strategies beyond the "three Os" and actively find ways how the country can maximize gains and contribute to the region's development. If the Philippines understood that its national interests are highly intertwined with the interests of the GCC states and all other members in the international community, the country's strategic policy would be planned with a vision and with a sense of urgency.

The Way Forward: Operationalization of a New Strategy for the Philippines

The changing realities currently shaping the economic and geopolitical landscape of the GCC and the Middle East as a whole are requiring an urgent re-evaluation of states' perspectives and policies. States must assess whether or not existing policies toward the GCC are still practical and aligned with their national interests considering regional developments. The Philippines is not an exception, as it continues to regard the GCC countries as important partners for peace and national development. As bilateral relationships with GCC countries are maturing, the Philippines will also need to rethink its policy and reframe its approach toward the region.

Some areas in which the Philippines could start to invest are maritime cooperation in connection with the protection of our seafarers in the Gulf, accessing Arab investments from the sovereign wealth fund, encouraging agricultural and food security collaboration, increasing the degree of access of Filipino products to Arab markets, employment of Filipino professionals in the artificial intelligence and information technological spheres, institutionalizing halal processing initiatives in the Philippines for exports, increasing cooperation in green technology, relaxing Philippine visa requirements to GCC tourists, encouraging and increasing business matching activities, supporting academic, research and cultural collaborations, and lastly, opening doors for defense and security cooperation with the Arab GCC countries.

Given the regional environment of ongoing wars, successful *détentes*, liberal reforms, and new geopolitical alliances, the Philippines needs to reframe its role in regional affairs and make a strategic calculation of risks and opportunities to better advance its national interests in the Middle East. Doing this may require Filipino leaders and policy makers to start looking at the region differently, i.e., away from the ambit of the global alliance with the US and beyond the traditional areas of engagement. This requires a new paradigm vis-à-vis the region, as the region itself is changing its traditions and old practices to become more open, market-oriented, friendly, and reliable partners for the Philippines. To change the mindset of Philippine leaders and ordinary Filipinos, it is important to promote more research activities about the region and encourage interactions at different levels. The Philippines needs to revisit the crucial stance of exercising an independent foreign policy in its relations with the GCC and ensure that it

prioritizes the advancement of its national interests over any alliance and partnership that it is a part of. This can be done through bilateral, regional (through ASEAN and the OIC), as well as in several multilateral platforms such as the UN and its affiliated bodies and institutions.

To ensure that the Philippine approach is effective and responsive to the realities of the GCC region, the country must focus its efforts into the following priority tasks: (1) Focus and diversify strategies toward embarking on new areas of cooperation; (2) Tap GCC investors to invest in relevant industries in the Philippines; (3) Tap business sectors in the Philippines to invest in GCC markets; (4) Encourage national media to promote positive images of the GCC; (5) Review visa requirements for GCC tourists; (6) Encourage and support Filipino scholars and think tanks based in the Middle East and North Africa; (7) Increase the visibility of Filipino scholars in the research agenda of Gulf universities through Memoranda of Understanding or Agreement; (8) Initiate proactive bilateral and regional economic consultations at various levels; (9) Explore unsanctioned areas of cooperation (such as in the case of Iran); (10) Increase support staff to Philippine posts in the GCC to cater to urgent demands; (11) Additional allocation of budget to Philippine posts in the GCC; (12) Intensify people-to-people engagements through cultural and public diplomacy; (13) Explore bilateral and regional defense and security cooperation with GCC countries; and (14) Review the good experiences of ASEAN countries in terms of their successful engagement with the GCC and Middle East countries

The Middle East region, particularly the GCC area, is experiencing significant economic and geopolitical transformations that determine the conduct of their relations with regional and international powers. Economic developments have taken a liberal turn with the leadership of reform-minded leaders. Relations between antagonistic states are normalizing, and new economic and geopolitical alliances are emerging. Meanwhile, the Israeli war on Gaza is still damaging the lives and properties of the Palestinian people and worsening regional rapport. All of this is taking place amid the decreased engagement of the US in Middle East affairs.

The US move to refocus its geopolitical and security attention from the Middle East to Southeast Asia is creating a regional power vacuum and uncertainty for the GCC countries. China's increasing engagement in the region under its Belt and Road Initiative has given the GCC countries some hope that it will fill this power vacuum and assume the role of balancer in regional affairs. China, along with the US, is now expected by the Arab GCC to perform the dual function of a security balancer and a strategic economic partner to realize the GCC Arab vision for liberalization and development. Hence, the entry of China as a new global power is a major factor in the new economic and geopolitical realities experienced by the Middle East region today.

ASEAN member states including the Philippines are expected to take advantage of this development. Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf are strategically located and abundant in resources, making them extremely valuable in trade and commercial endeavors. At the same time, their sea lanes are a hotbed of illicit activities such as piracy, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and terrorism. The security of these areas is crucial

to the success of international maritime engagements. Thus, it is a matter of urgency to forge cooperation in comprehensive terms which can deliver benefits to all countries involved. Given China's intensified maritime activities across Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of Asia under the BRI, it is of utmost importance to China to participate in inter-regional cooperation with ASEAN and GCC on maritime security.

The Philippines, as a member of ASEAN and as a supplier of labor to GCC countries, should take this development strategically. The maturing bilateral relations of the Philippines and the GCC countries means that both sides would need to re-evaluate their policies to respond to the changing economic and geopolitical realities. This re-evaluation entails that the Philippines shall approach the region beyond the traditional areas of cooperation. The exercise of an independent foreign policy in dealing with the GCC and the Middle East in general will help advance the country's national interests and hence, help articulate its national identity and aspirations as an independent country.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East region, particularly the GCC area, is experiencing significant economic and geopolitical transformations that determine the conduct of their relations with regional and international powers. Economic developments have taken a liberal turn with the leadership of reform-minded leaders. Relations between antagonistic states are normalizing, and new economic and geopolitical alliances are emerging. Meanwhile, the Israeli war on Gaza is still damaging the lives and properties of the Palestinian people and worsening regional rapport. All of this is taking place amid the decreased engagement of the US in Middle East affairs.

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This will require political will and a concrete strategy to approach foreign relations in the region based on genuine Philippine national interests. In light of regional political and economic developments, Philippine policy makers, implementors, and scholars alike should start really posturing the Philippines as an independent country. In addition, they must change their traditional mindset in looking at regional engagements and start focusing on new opportunities that the region could offer.

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