

## ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ВЗАЄМОДІЇ УКРАЇНИ З МОНАРХІЯМИ ПЕРСЬКОЇ ЗАТОКИ У КОНТЕКСТІ ПОСИЛЕННЯ БЕЗПЕКОВИХ ВИКЛИКІВ

## FEATURES OF UKRAINE INTERACTION WITH GULF MONARCHIES IN THE CONTEXT OF ESCALATING SECURITY CHALLENGES

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**Abstract.** *The article examines the features, current state and prospects of Ukraine's interaction with the Gulf monarchies in the context of escalating security challenges. Authors substantiates the intensification of political dialogue between Ukraine and the GCC member states in connection with the increase in the number of official contacts in the context of the growing need for Ukraine to increase the level of political support. The qualitative characterization of official contacts is generalized, on the basis of which the main directions of such interaction are outlined. The importance of such support is confirmed, which is determined by the growing influence of the Persian Gulf states in the international arena. The authors substantiates the origins and peculiarities of the GCC member states' position on the Russian-Ukrainian war through the view of their national interests. The reasons for the interest of the Gulf monarchies in economic cooperation with Russia are highlighted and the negative consequences of this trend for Ukraine are emphasized.*

*The impact of Ukraine's strategic documents on its current position in relations with the GCC countries is described. The negative impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the trade and economic relations between Ukraine and the GCC is reflected. Key problems for Ukraine's foreign policy in relations with the GCC countries are outlined, referring to the current geopolitical situation, which is determined by the expansion of BRICS and closer interaction of the monarchies with Asian countries, particularly China and India, as a counterbalance to the western direction of their foreign policy in the context of a multilateral approach.*

*The study emphasizes the need to develop a comprehensive and long-term strategy for interaction with the GCC member states in both bilateral and multilateral formats, considering the effectiveness of such an approach as outlined by the authors.*

**Keywords:** *Ukraine, Persian Gulf, Middle East, GCC, foreign policy, security, KSA, UAE, Qatar, Russia-Ukraine war.*

**Анотація.** *У статті досліджуються особливості, сучасний стан і перспективи взаємодії України з монархіями Перської затоки в контексті ескалації викликів безпеці. Обґрунтовано інтенсифікацію політичного діалогу між Україною та країнами членами РСАДПЗ у зв'язку зі збільшенням кількості офіційних контактів у контексті зростання*

необхідності для України підвищити рівень політичної підтримки. Узагальнено якісну характеристику офіційних контактів, на основі чого окреслено основні напрямки такої взаємодії. Підтверджено важливість такої підтримки, що детермінується зростанням впливу держав Перської затоки на міжнародній арені. Обґрунтовано витоки та особливості позиції країн-членів РСАДПЗ щодо російсько-української війни крізь призму їх національних інтересів. Висвітлені причини зацікавленості монархій Перської затоки в економічній взаємодії з РФ та наголошено на негативних наслідках такої тенденції для України.

Описано вплив стратегічних документів України на її сучасну позицію у відносинах з країнами РСАДПЗ. Відображено негативний вплив російсько-української війни на торгово-економічні відносини України та РСАДПЗ. Окреслено ключові проблеми для зовнішньої політики України у відносинах з країнами РСАДПЗ, посиляючись на сучасну геополітичну ситуацію, що детермінується розширенням БРІКС та тіснішою взаємодією монархій з країнами Азії, зокрема КНР та Індією, як противагою західному напрямку їх зовнішньої політики у контексті багатостороннього підходу.

Дослідження наголошує на необхідності розробки комплексної та довгострокової стратегії взаємодії з країнами-членами РСАДПЗ у двосторонньому та багатосторонньому форматі з огляду на ефективність такого підходу, що окреслюється авторами.

**Ключові слова:** Україна, Перська затока, Близький Схід, РСАДПЗ, зовнішня політика, безпека, КСА, ОАЕ, Катар, російсько-українська війна.

## **Introduction.**

In the context of escalating security challenges faced by Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion, the need to strengthen relations with the countries of the Persian Gulf becomes increasingly important. These relations are crucial for Ukraine not only for political support in the war against the aggressor but also for bolstering the country's economy by improving trade performance. The geopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically, necessitating the formation of new alliances and the strengthening of existing ones to ensure resilience and development in a complex international environment.

The member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have emerged as key players on the global stage due to their strategic economic positions, substantial energy resources, and growing political influence. For Ukraine, interaction with these countries offers the opportunity to gain vital support across various sectors. Politically, the support of the GCC countries can enhance Ukraine's standing on the international stage, counterbalancing Russian influence. Economically, partnerships with these countries can stimulate investment and trade, aiding in the recovery and development of the nation.

## **The purpose of the article.**

The article aims to identify the features of Ukraine's interaction with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf in the context of escalating security challenges. This is achieved through a comprehensive analysis of the current state of political interaction and the determination of prospects for the further development of bilateral and multilateral relations.

## **Literature review.**

In outlining the extent of scientific research on this issue, it is worth mentioning the contributions of O. Koppel and V. Fedianin, who have examined Ukraine's policy in the Persian Gulf region, particularly the impact of the Russian factor on the current state of these relations (Koppel O. & Fedianin V., 2022). The contribution of N. Novytska are noteworthy, as she explores the positions of the Persian Gulf states regarding Russia's war against Ukraine and the level of their cooperation with the parties involved in the conflict (Novytska N. & Perepelytsia G., 2022). Additionally, her research highlights the rivalry between Ukraine and Russia for international support from the Gulf states, particularly the Arab oil monarchies, in the context of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine (Novytska N. & Cherkas B., 2022).

It is worth mentioning the work of R. Petyur, which defines the place of the Middle East countries in Ukraine's foreign policy in terms of bilateral and multilateral relations (Petyur R., 2007) and the work of M. Subh "Transformation Processes in the GCC Countries in the Context of Globalization." (Subh M., 2015). O. Segeda focuses on the analysis of Kuwait's position on the

Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, as well as the reaction of Kuwaiti society and media to it, analyzes the prerequisites for the formation of Kuwait's official position, records the facts of humanitarian and financial assistance to Ukraine, and support at the international level (*Segeda O., 2022*). In the article "Ukraine-Qatar: Beyond Mediation", S. Danilov explores the role of Qatar as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian war and the areas of possible cooperation between Ukraine and Qatar (*Danylov S., 2024*).

Among foreign scholars, it is worth mentioning K. Ulriksen, who studies how the Russian-Ukrainian war affected the security dynamics in the region (*Ulrichsen K., 2023*). At the same time, we note the lack of generalized studies of the features of the current state of Ukraine's political interaction with the Gulf monarchies and the prospects for further development of both bilateral and multilateral relations within the GCC.

### **Main results of the research.**

The current state of political interaction with the Gulf monarchies in the vast majority of contacts boils down to Ukraine's need to secure greater support from the countries of the Global South, where the countries selected for analysis, especially the KSA, UAE, and Qatar, play a leading role. On this basis, political dialogue has intensified in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the increased need for Kyiv to attract support from international actors. This need is met mainly through bilateral visits and meetings. In this context, it is worth mentioning the official visit of Ukraine's Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa Maksym Subkh to Oman in March 2022 (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2023*) and the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine to Kuwait in April 2023 (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2023*). Particularly noteworthy are the working visits of the President of Ukraine to the KSA in May 2023 (*Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2023*) and February 2024 (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2024*), where V. Zelenskyy met with Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and his visit to Qatar in June 2024 (*Radio Svoboda, 2024*).

With the escalation of challenges, the toolkit of Ukraine's foreign policy apparatus has also expanded. This is evidenced by President Zelensky's presence at the Doha Forum in 2022 and the Arab League Summit in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia). In August 2023, a meeting was held with representatives from 40 countries, including GCC member states. From Ukraine's perspective, the primary goal of the meeting was to articulate the importance of the points of the peace formula for global security. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that the peace summit was a "breakthrough" for Ukraine (*Reuters, 2023*).

As we can see from the number of official contacts, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is given priority in intensifying political dialogue among the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. In this context, we can agree with the point of view of Luke Coffey, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, who notes: "Kyiv knows that the Kingdom has influence not only among other Muslim states, but also in many countries of the Global South." (*Coffey L., 2024*).

The growing interest in Ukraine on the part of the Gulf states was evidenced by the visits of officials to Kyiv. In this context, it is worth mentioning the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the KSA to Ukraine in February 2023 (*Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2023*), the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain in May 2023 (*Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2023*), the visit of the Minister of Climate Change and Environment of the UAE to Kyiv in June 2023 (*Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2023*), the meeting of the Prime Minister of Qatar with the President of Ukraine in Kyiv in July 2023 (*Ukrinform, 2023*).

Analyzing the content and outcomes of Ukraine's official contacts with the Gulf monarchies, we can determine that their goal is to restore and improve relations with the GCC member countries. Communication is built along key directions such as political support for Ukraine in the war with Russia by promoting the points of the "peace formula"; cooperation in the humanitarian sphere; restoration and enhancement of trade relations with a focus on Ukraine's participation in supporting global food security; and increasing the inflow of investments from the Gulf countries.

The specifics of supporting Ukraine's peace formula by the GCC countries stem from their spectrum of interests and mostly concern points related to nuclear, food, and energy security. The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf actively support the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative, reflecting their interest in ensuring food security in the region to maintain its stability. The Gulf monarchies

have demonstrated their participation in addressing Ukraine's energy security issues by supplying energy resources as part of humanitarian initiatives.

The mediation of Saudi Arabia (*Radio Svoboda, 2023*), the UAE (*Reuters, 2024*) and Qatar (*Aljazeera, 2024*) in negotiations on the exchange of prisoners of war as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the provision of humanitarian aid and a platform for articulating Ukraine's interests to the Middle East, including the discussion of the Ukrainian peace formula (Jeddah, KSA) should be highlighted separately. In view of this, we can identify the main regional players who see it as their interest to project their influence beyond the Persian Gulf or the Middle East, in this case within the framework of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Despite the intensification of political dialogue and certain successes in engaging GCC countries in resolving the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it must be noted that the GCC member states' positions remain predominantly neutral. Their abstention in the UN General Assembly vote to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council and their refusal to support Western sanctions aimed at diminishing Russia's war capabilities, particularly evident in Abu Dhabi's actions, affirm this stance. Support for peace initiatives without a clear bias towards either side demonstrates the GCC countries' leaders' desire to separate the economic and political components of their foreign policy.

In 2022-2023, trade between Russia and GCC countries showed significant changes. The UAE became the largest trading partner, with trade volume increasing by 68% to a record \$9 billion, mainly due to non-oil trade, including Russian agricultural products and precious metals (gold). There was also an increase in Russian businesses and investors relocating to the UAE (*Smagin N., 2023*). Saudi Arabia and Russia also strengthened economic ties, focusing on energy cooperation and agricultural imports, despite Western sanctions. Similarly, trade with Qatar and Oman grew, especially in the energy and industrial sectors. Trade between Russia and Bahrain also developed, though not as significantly as with other GCC countries, which can be attributed to Bahrain's naturally small market (*Smagin N., 2023*).

An analysis of Ukraine's trade with GCC countries for 2023 indicates significant fluctuations in both export and import figures compared to 2022. Data presented in thousands of USD and indexed relative to the previous year's trade volumes provide an insight into the dynamics of Ukraine's trade relations with these countries (*State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2024*).

In 2023, Ukraine's trade with the GCC countries exhibited considerable fluctuations in both exports and imports compared to 2022. Exports to Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia noticeably declined. In percentage terms, compared to 2022, exports decreased in Bahrain by 27.5%, Qatar by 22%, Kuwait by 25.4%, Oman by 56.6%, and Saudi Arabia by 33.7% (*State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2024*).

The only exception was exports to the UAE, which showed a slight increase of 4.6%, largely due to active interaction between Ukraine and the UAE in preparation for signing the CEPA agreement. On April 26, 2024, in Abu Dhabi, Ukraine's First Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko and UAE Minister of State for Foreign Trade Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi signed a Joint Statement on the completion of negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Ukraine and the UAE. The negotiations resulted in agreements on significant liberalization of market access for goods and services and the foundation for deepening cooperation in various fields (*Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2024*).

On the other hand, imports generally increased in trade with all analyzed countries. Trade with Bahrain saw moderate growth of 19.6%, while imports from Qatar and the UAE experienced significant growth of 88.3% and 84.6%, respectively. Imports from Kuwait and Oman rose sharply, amounting to 6667.7% and 411.2%, respectively, on the volume of 2022, while imports from Saudi Arabia showed moderate growth of 9.5% (*State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2024*).

The trade balance calculations shows that Bahrain had a positive trade balance of \$753.2 thousand, while the UAE showed a significant positive balance of \$51,579.5 thousand. In contrast, relations with Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia recorded trade deficits of -\$11,194.5 thousand, -\$74,286.8 thousand, -\$29,915.1 thousand, and -\$47,006 thousand, respectively. This situation is atypical for the trade and economic relations between Ukraine and the Gulf countries, where historically there has not been a steady trend of a negative trade balance. The reason for this is the

increased supply of energy resources from the Gulf countries, as evidenced by data from the "Dixi Group" company (*Dixi Group, 2024*).

In 2022, the total import of energy resources from the Gulf states amounted to \$199,990 thousand, distributed as follows: Bahrain - \$266 thousand, the United Arab Emirates - \$28,596 thousand, and Saudi Arabia - \$171,128 thousand. In 2023, the total imports amounted to \$422,074 thousand, distributed as follows: Bahrain - \$209 thousand, Qatar - \$85 thousand, Kuwait - \$95,337 thousand, the United Arab Emirates - \$84,275 thousand, Oman - \$31,739 thousand, and Saudi Arabia - \$210,429 thousand (*Dixi Group, 2024*).

Despite the positive trend of Ukraine diversifying its energy supply sources, the origin of imported energy resources must be considered, as GCC countries actively cooperate with the Russian Federation in this sphere. We can conclude that the trade interaction data highlight a trend toward reduced exports and increased imports with most GCC countries, leading to a trade deficit. Noticeable exceptions were the UAE and Bahrain, which maintained a positive trade balance. The significant increase in imports from Kuwait and Oman was particularly impressive, indicating a substantial shift in trade dynamics in 2023.

Given the aforementioned economic interest in relations with Russia, particularly in the UAE, which has significantly intensified due to assistance in circumventing sanctions (*Fedianin V., 2023*) and the desire of the main Gulf players (KSA, UAE, Qatar) to pursue a balancing foreign policy (*Ulrichsen K., 2023*), it is crucial for the Arab countries to participate in resolving peace issues to solidify their influential image on the international stage. Consequently, the rivalry among the Gulf countries, which became particularly pronounced after the "Arab Spring," continues to manifest in light of current challenges. This indicates that supporting a peaceful resolution, assisting in hostage release, and providing humanitarian aid are attempts to strengthen their positions as regional leaders and elevate their status by "helping" to address security challenges.

Gulf countries emphasize that they will not take sides in the conflict to maintain a dialogue space for conflict resolution, seeking to strengthen their positions in the Global South, where the US or European countries may fail to help, and GCC countries find ways to resolve issues, even if only in a humanitarian context. This partly neutralizes the negative effect of ties with Russia and the refusal to support sanctions through political activities aimed at "resolving the conflict by peaceful means." This perspective somewhat diminishes the past or future achievements of Ukrainian diplomacy in that the current international order, positions, and interests of the Gulf states set an upper limit on the qualitative development of Ukraine's efforts to involve the GCC in conflict resolution. For Ukraine, at this stage, it is crucial to maintain the neutrality of the Gulf states to prevent a scenario that could negatively impact efforts to engage GCC member countries. Understanding these aspects will help direct limited resources appropriately, although it is inappropriate to claim that such activities lack a logical basis given the GCC's positions in modern international relations.

Ukraine's volatile position in relations with the GCC stems from historically having more ties with Western countries, as determined in strategic foreign policy documents such as the "Foreign Policy Strategy" (*Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2021*), "National Security Strategy" (*Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2020*), and the Law of Ukraine "On National Security" (*Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2018*). As a result, Middle Eastern countries, particularly the Gulf states, remained on the periphery of Ukraine's foreign policy vectors. Missed opportunities have made the issue of securing support from the "Global South" more urgent and challenging to address. As seen from the current state of affairs, the "ad hoc" principle is not implicative of Ukraine's foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf subregion. A long-term strategy and goals must be established to "defeat Russia in the Persian Gulf." However, given the current situation, correcting this is unlikely in the short term.

The situation is also complicated by Ukraine's traditional focus on bilateral interactions with the Gulf states in both its foreign policy activities and strategic documents. The lack of specific goals and strategies regarding multilateral interaction within the GCC format has significantly limited Ukraine's ability to secure national interests in the subregion. In this regard, China's experience, which sees significant benefits in both bilateral relations with Gulf countries and multilateral cooperation within the GCC, could be useful. This partly explains the increased attention of Gulf countries to Asian markets and partners. Russia also has a strategic dialogue within the GCC framework, with

regular ministerial meetings, the latest of which was held on July 10, 2023 (*GCC Secretariat General, 2023*). When the Biden administration attempted to renew cooperation intensity with the GCC in June 2023, a multilateral ministerial meeting mechanism was used to discuss key cooperation points (*U.S. Department of State, 2023*).

For Ukraine, there was only a meeting at the ambassadorial level between Ukraine and the GCC Secretary-General, and since the war began, there has been an online meeting between Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Andriy Yermak on one side and GCC ministers on the other. Thus, the limited communication within the Ukraine-GCC format does not give grounds to claim that this subregional direction in Ukraine's foreign policy is formed in the traditional sense. This factor must be considered to use available resources effectively.

Additionally, it is important to consider the influence of the current architecture of international relations, as in recent years, GCC member countries have increasingly shifted their exports from "Western" to Asian markets (especially China and India) due to the rising demand for energy in Asia. Consequently, 70% of oil exports from the GCC go to Asian countries (*Kateb A., 2024*). This dynamic can be confidently stated as a continuation of the multilateral foreign policy of the GCC leaders in response to the gradual decline of US influence in the Middle East since the "Arab Spring" events. Accordingly, the geopolitical landscape complicates Ukraine's policy towards the GCC member countries and its future possibilities.

The Western embargo on Russian energy resources has pushed Russian oil traders to deepen cooperation with Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, creating a network of shared interests between the Gulf countries and Russia. While the GCC countries navigate this complex network of alliances, Ukraine faces the challenge of aligning its foreign policy with the shifting priorities of these influential Gulf states.

Moreover, the accession of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to BRICS, primarily driven by China and Russia, may strengthen the GCC's strategic pivot to Asia. Such a move will enhance the GCC's role in global economic and political programs, potentially leading to the creation of an alternative financial system that diminishes the dominance of Western institutions in the worst-case scenario. For Ukraine, this presents a strategic dilemma, as the GCC's inclusion in BRICS+ could further isolate Ukraine from key economic and political networks, complicating its efforts to garner support for its geopolitical interests (*Livemint, 2024*).

Furthermore, the multilateralism of the GCC leaders' policies and balancing position has already manifested in Saudi Arabia's refusal to send representatives to the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland in mid-June 2024, citing the impracticality of discussing peace without Russia (*dpa-AFX, 2024*).

In summary, the GCC countries' reorientation towards Asia and the deepening of cooperation with China and Russia create significant challenges for Ukraine's foreign policy. The strengthening of economic and political ties between GCC countries and Asian countries, along with the potential for new financial systems within BRICS+, complicates Ukraine's efforts to secure strategic partnerships and trade agreements with the Gulf monarchies. As the global economic landscape continues to evolve, Ukraine must navigate these complexities to effectively engage with the GCC countries and align its foreign policy with the changing priorities of these influential states.

### **Conclusions**

To achieve goals in relations with the Gulf countries, the Ukrainian government must consider several critical aspects. First, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive and long-term strategy for interaction with the GCC member states, going beyond the current bilateral approach. This strategy should focus on ensuring multilateral dialogue while maintaining active bilateral engagement. When developing this strategy, it is important to consider the GCC leaders' involvement in resolving the Russia-Ukraine conflict, demonstrated by their neutral position, which tends to lean towards Russia over time.

Second, the Ukrainian government should pay attention to the geopolitical realities of the Gulf countries' foreign policy, which increasingly focuses on Asia. Strategic alliances between the Gulf states, China, and Russia require a cautious approach from Ukraine, which must balance its strategic

objectives of Euro- and Euro-Atlantic integration with the need for effective engagement with the Gulf region.

Third, Ukraine must work on restoring a positive trade balance and expanding trade relations with the Gulf countries, supporting the historically developed agrarian sector, as it aligns with the GCC's interests. Additionally, Ukraine should actively seek alternative ways of interaction in non-oil sectors, which could serve as a substantial counterbalance to the Gulf monarchies' cooperation with Russia, primarily based on energy trade. This vector appears particularly attractive considering the GCC countries are actively diversifying their economies. This allows for cautious optimism regarding the long-term interaction with Russia.

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