

China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Multilevel Diplomacy in a Divided Arab World

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Abstract

This article examines China's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council states. China's interests in the Gulf region have been evolving; and in the 21st century they cover geopolitical interests, economic and trade interests, energy security interests, and nontraditional security interests. China's approach is multilevel: it maintains diplomatic relations with individual GCC states; it has initiated formal mechanisms of regular regional forums; it engages in people-to-people diplomacy through student exchanges and the setting up of Confucius Institutes in various GCC states; it maintains dialogues with other major powers; and it participates in important multilateral conferences on regional affairs. This article assesses China's performance in this multilevel diplomacy that demands close coordination between the various levels of foreign policy making and policy implementation, and the maintenance of a delicate balance in the complex major power competition and regional rivalries in a divided Arab world. In line with China's Arab-world experts who often examine the strategic configuration in the Gulf region within a framework of five periods, China's Gulf policy is analyzed in the following stages: (1) 1958–1967, (2) 1967–1971, (3) 1971–1979, (4) 1979–1990, (5) 1990–2001, and (6) 2001–present. Major emphasis is placed on developments in recent years.

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