



Not Just hydrocarbons: Japan’s multifaceted foreign policy approaches towards the GCC states

Kazuto Matsuda¹ · Nikolay Kozhanov¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that in spite of the prevailing belief that the relations between Japan and the GCC states are primarily driven by the hydrocarbon trade, the Japanese authorities’ efforts to strengthen their ties with the GCC states are determined by a more complex set of factors. These include not only Japan’s energy security, but also its non-energy economic interests and geostrategic factors. The study thus demonstrates the salience of a multi-sectoral analytical approach, going beyond the traditional hydrocarbon trade, to grasp the full complexity of the increasingly multifaceted ties between Japan and the GCC states.

Keywords Japan · GCC states · Foreign policy · Energy security · Multi-sectoral analysis

Introduction

The increasing presence of key East Asian countries—Japan, China and South Korea—in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states¹ has already become a major pattern in the current regional realities of the Persian Gulf (e.g. Abdel Ghafar and Baabood 2023; Ehteshami and Miyagi 2015; Fulton and Sim 2019; Haghirian and Zaccara 2023; Matsuda 2023; Nakamura and Wright 2023; Niblock and Malik 2013; Sim and Fulton 2023).² Their involvement in the daily life of the

¹ Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.

² The use of the term “Persian Gulf” in this article does not endorse any political agenda. The authors use it following the most common practice. Moreover, the preference is given to the shortened version of the geographical name—“the Gulf”—in order to avoid sensitive and unnecessary political discussions.

✉ Kazuto Matsuda
km1901122@qu.edu.qa

Nikolay Kozhanov
nikolay@qu.edu.qa

¹ Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar



GCC states is evident in a wide range of areas, including infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Dubai and Doha metros by Japanese companies,³ South Korea's participation in the construction of the UAE's first nuclear power plants and pharmaceutical cooperation between China and the UAE for the mass production of COVID-19 vaccines during the global pandemic. In turn, since the 2000s, the resource-rich GCC states have adopted the so-called Look East policy or the pivot to Asia (e.g. Davidson 2010; Ehteshami and Miyagi 2015; Janardhan 2021, 2020a, 2020b, 2015; Ulrichsen 2016), which aims to strengthen their economic and, to a lesser extent, political ties with Asian countries. By the 2020s, this strategy had become a logical response to challenges created by changes in the US regional role, the diversification needs of GCC economies and the changing realities of the global hydrocarbon markets, among other factors (e.g. Kozhanov 2021; Ulrichsen 2016). These political and economic calculations have brought the two sides of the world much closer, especially in the past two decades.

In this regard, the foreign policy approaches of resource-poor Japan vis-à-vis the hydrocarbon-rich GCC states—whose importance for Tokyo has substantially increased in recent years—are of special interest. This article's main argument is that despite the prevailing belief that the relations between Japan and the GCC states are primarily driven by the hydrocarbon trade, the Japanese authorities' efforts to strengthen their ties with the GCC states are determined by a more complex set of factors. These include not only Japan's energy security, but also its non-energy economic interests and geostrategic factors. In order to demonstrate this, the article analyses various official documents issued by the Japanese government institutions that regulate Tokyo's approaches to the GCC states; these sources have often been overlooked by the existing scholarship on Japan–Gulf ties (Tsujiigami and Horinuki 2015). Through this approach, the article aims to explain what motives shape the Japanese government's views towards the GCC states and how these determinants have evolved over the past decade. Hence, in contrast to most of the existing literature, which has traditionally focused on Arab views of Asia–Gulf relations (e.g. the literature on the aforementioned “Look East” policy, the “pivot to Asia” and the GCC states' need for “security of demand” for their hydrocarbons⁴), this study examines the Japanese government's vision of the Japan–Gulf relations, thereby filling the research gap on how the Japanese government sees the GCC states within Japan's broader foreign policy. The study also employs a multi-sectoral analytical approach to the topic, offering a comprehensive picture of their diversifying ties that are not limited to mere hydrocarbon trade.

³ The construction of the Dubai Metro involved several Japanese companies: Mitsubishi Corporation, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Obayashi Corporation, Kajima Construction and Kinki Sharyo (Kobayashi and Miyagi 2015). The construction of the Doha Metro was contracted to the Japanese companies Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Mitsubishi Corporation, Hitachi and Kinki Sharyo, as well as a few other foreign companies.

⁴ “Security of demand” concerns security of demand for the hydrocarbon products of oil-producing states (in this context the GCC states) in oil-importing countries. For the rentier states in the Gulf, security of demand is integral and vital to national security (see, for example, Boëthius 2011 and Yamada 2023).



In terms of its timeframe, the study is focused on developments in Japan–Gulf relations within the last decade, which witnessed greater foreign policy commitment from Japan vis-à-vis the GCC states (Matsuda 2023, 2022a).⁵ However, it pays special attention to 2017–21. This period covers the ministerial offices of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2006–7, 2012–20) and Foreign Minister Taro Kono (2017–19), when the Japanese government’s attention to the GCC states increased significantly (as demonstrated later).

The article is divided into four sections. The first section will review the existing literature on Japan–Gulf relations. It will point out the absence of sufficient scholarly attention towards the topic of Japan–Gulf relations and its non-hydrocarbon facets in particular. This finding will justify the present paper’s approach: a more comprehensive, multi-sectoral analysis incorporating Japan’s often-overlooked official documents. The second section will highlight the strengthening of Japan–Gulf relations in recent years. Then, the third section will elucidate and analyse the three main drives of Japan’s multidimensional foreign policy approaches towards the GCC states, providing empirical evidence in favour of the article’s main argument. Finally, the concluding section will offer a brief summary of the discussion and present research implications, emphasising the relevance and salience of the multi-sectoral analytical approach to this particular research area.

Japan–gulf relations in the existing literature

While Tokyo’s perspective towards the region has traditionally drawn less scholarly attention than that of China, Japan’s ties with the GCC states have been actively developing in recent years. Consequently, how the place of the GCC states in the strategic thinking of the Japanese leadership changed has been often overlooked. In fact, the literature on this topic remains scarce, although the number of studies on Japan–Gulf relations or broader Asia–Middle East ties has gradually increased over the past decade due to their growing interdependence (e.g. Abdel Ghafar and Baabood 2023; Davidson 2010; Ehteshami and Miyagi 2015; Matsuda 2023, 2022b; Nakamura and Wright 2023; Niblock and Malik 2013). The following statement by Tsujigami and Horinuki (2015) clearly illustrates the paucity of relevant literature:

In spite of the importance of the GCC for Japan, existing diplomatic studies of the GCC focus on Saudi–US relations, whilst studies of Japan pay most attention to Japan’s relations with the USA and its East Asian neighbours. Although there are a few memoirs of Japanese diplomats and businessmen who spent

⁵ Japan’s first encounter with the GCC states was arguably the visit of the Japanese official delegation, headed by diplomat Masaharu Yoshida, to the Gulf region, including Bahrain, at the end of the nineteenth century. The visit’s aim was to investigate the region and gain permission to trade in Persia (Hosaka 2011). As for Japan’s first hydrocarbon trade with the GCC states, it dates back as far as 1934, when the oil-carrying tanker *El Segundo* left Bahraini shores for Japan to ship Bahraini crude oil. The shipment was the first-ever crude oil export of any Arab nation and the first-ever oil import from the GCC states by Japan in history (Hosaka 2014).



time in the Gulf, and some work on Japan–Middle East relations, relations between Japan and the Gulf have, with few exceptions, been neglected. (86)

In a more recent context, Heng (2022, 20) similarly pointed out that “Tokyo’s policies in the Gulf have minimally figured”. Moreover, Yoshihiko Kamo (2017), a former Japanese Ambassador to the UAE, contended in his memoir that, notwithstanding the UAE’s growing importance to Japan, “there is a serious lack of information on the UAE for Japan” (8).

Furthermore, it is imperative to point out that when Japan–Gulf relations are discussed in scholarly works, the discourse is often confined to the hydrocarbon and trade dimensions (e.g. Abdullah and Al-Tamimi 2015; Alshamsi and Kandil 2001; Al-Tamimi 2013; Calabrese 2009; Nakajima 2015; Niblock 2013). This approach implies that these factors are the sole drivers of Japan–Gulf relations, leaving other dimensions largely unexplored (Matsuda 2022b). This is evidenced by the statement of Abdullah and Al-Tamimi (2015) that “trade is at the heart of the growing links between GCC countries and Japan, which centre on the crude oil and gas” (para. 2). While hydrocarbons and economic factors are undeniably essential aspects of Asia–Gulf relations, the narrow focus on these two dimensions has often created an incomplete and one-sided narrative. In fact, while several scholars and Japanese diplomats have shed light on the non-hydrocarbon dimensions of Japan–Gulf ties in recent years (e.g. Abdel Ghafar 2020; Abdel Ghafar and Baabood 2023; Heng 2023, 2022; Horinuki 2023; Janardhan 2021; Kamo 2017; Matsuda 2023, 2022b; Miyagi et al. 2013; Muto 2019; Nakamura 2016; Nakamura and Wright 2023; Saito and Janardhan 2020a, b; Yamada 2023), the mainstream academic tradition is still confined to the above-mentioned hydrocarbon-centred approach (Matsuda 2022b). Hence, there is a pressing need to conceptualize multidimensional forces that constitute Japan’s relations with the GCC states and the broader Middle East that have hitherto been increasingly multifaceted and interdependent (Nakamura and Wright 2023). This study aims to fill this research gap. In addition, it should be underlined that these multidimensional forces should not be conceptually limited in the bilateral domain. As the study later demonstrates, they can take a form of inter-regional foreign policy frameworks. Thus, the study builds on the recently emerging, albeit still limited, body of literature on the multifaceted nature of their ties by suggesting the salience of inter-regional foreign policy framework that is also at play.

The dominance of the energy-oriented analytical approach may be explained by the lack of sufficient attention to the relevant official documents in Japanese. Although scholars occasionally use their translated versions, there is often a difference in the volume of information provided by the translated document and its original. Indeed, the originals sometimes contain more detailed and nuanced information than their translated versions. For example, until 2014, the English version of Japan’s diplomatic bluebook⁶ published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

⁶ Diplomatic bluebook is a publicly available official annual report on Japan’s foreign policy and activities published by MOFA. It is one of the common reference points regarding Japan’s overall foreign policy strategies.



(MOFA) was often a mere summary of the Japanese original, leaving out significant information on the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.⁷ This situation has improved since 2015, as MOFA has begun to publish more complete diplomatic bluebooks in English. However, their Spanish and French versions (published since 2019) still provide only summaries (MOFA 2021e). In addition, some policy documents are published only in Japanese. This is exemplified by the policy document of the “New International Resource Strategy”, formulated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2020, which has often been overlooked by the existing scholarship on Japan–Gulf relations despite its importance and relevance.

Hence, in addition to the multi-sectoral analytical approach to the study of Japan–Gulf relations, the critical analysis of often-overlooked original official Japanese documents that mention the importance of the GCC states for Japan is imperative to obtain a more complete picture of strengthening Japan–Gulf relations. These sources include the aforementioned diplomatic bluebooks, official statistical data issued by the Ministry of Finance and policy documents published by the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy.

Japan–gulf relations on the rise

Notwithstanding the limited scholarly attention towards Japan–Gulf relations, Japan’s official government documents explicitly show that their ties have been on the rise in recent years. On the one hand, this is obvious from the intensity of high-ranking bilateral contacts, which have significantly increased since the 1990s. The MOFA documents show that at least 170 high-ranking visits from Japan to the GCC states took place between 2010 and 2020, compared to only 30 in the 1990s (Table 1).⁸⁹ These visits to the GCC states included at least four by Prime Minister Abe, 13 by Foreign Minister Kono and three by Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi (2019–21) between 2017 and 2021 (MOFA 2021f). Additionally, other Japanese ministers, such as the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Minister of Defense, have also visited the GCC states occasionally (MOFA 2021f).

High-ranking visits from the GCC states to Japan have also become more active in recent years. Between 2010 and 2020, 141 high-ranking visits were made from the GCC states to Japan, increasing from 64 in the 1990s (Table 1).¹⁰ For example, Japan has hosted several visits from Saudi Arabia in just the last few years; the country was visited by King Salman (2017), Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

⁷ As for the 2014 version, for example, the chapter on the Middle East and North Africa, to which the section on the GCC states belongs, consists of nine pages in the original Japanese version but less than a page in English (MOFA 2014a, 2014b).

⁸ The original Japanese government source from which the data is extracted does not provide the concrete definition of “high-ranking visits”. Nevertheless, it can be broadly defined from the original data that such visits are at least at the level of the heads of government institutions or parliament members.

⁹ Since the data on high-ranking visits between Japan and Kuwait for the period of 1990–1994 was not available, it is not reflected in the figure for the 1990–1999 period.

¹⁰ See footnote 8.



(2019), Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud (2019) and Minister of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources Khalid Al-Falih (2018) (MOFA 2021f). The same trend can be observed with other GCC states.¹¹ This intensification of high-ranking bilateral visits, during which cooperation in non-hydrocarbon sectors was often discussed in addition to oil and gas, demonstrates the growing mutual political and economic interests between Japan and the GCC states in recent years.

Moreover, bilateral economic relations between the two sides, which often attract scholarly attention, were active until at least 2019; in that year, political tensions in the Gulf caused several attacks on oil tankers, during which Japan-affiliated tankers were hit.¹² For example, the total trade between Japan and the GCC states reached approximately 11.6 trillion Japanese yen (approx. \$105.4 billion)¹³ in 2018, although the figure dropped sharply to 10.4 trillion Japanese yen (approx. \$95.4 billion) in 2019 and 6.9 trillion Japanese yen (approx. \$65 billion) in 2020 (Ministry of Finance 2021c).¹⁴ As for the trade balance between the two sides, Japan has traditionally seen a huge deficit due largely to its massive hydrocarbon imports from the GCC states: the 2020 figure stood at approximately –3.9 trillion Japanese yen (approx. –\$36.7 billion; Ministry of Finance 2021c). With respect to export products, the top three Japanese exports to the Middle East are automobiles, steel and automobile spare parts, while the top three import items from the Middle East to Japan are crude oil, liquified natural gas and petrochemical products as of 2020 (Ministry of Finance 2021d).¹⁵

As for Japan's foreign direct investments to the selected GCC states, from 2014–8, their net inflows (new investment inflows minus disinvestments) were positive. By the end of the period, these investments reached 36.3 billion Japanese yen (approx. \$33 million) for Saudi Arabia and 44.9 billion Japanese yen (approx. \$40.8 million) for the UAE. The picture was less bright in the subsequent years, as the volume of disinvestments was higher than that of new investment inflows, whose physical volume was also lower than in the previous years; this may have been due to the pressure of unfavourable economic conditions (Ministry of Finance 2021b). The range of sectors preferred by Japanese investors is very wide. It includes infrastructure (e.g. the construction of the Dubai and Doha metros by Japanese companies), the petrochemical industry (e.g. the petrochemical project at Rabigh in Saudi Arabia), clean energy (e.g. Japanese companies' participation in solar energy projects, as well as the development of the UAE's Masdar City), pearling (e.g. Japanese pearling experts' provision of technical expertise in the Abu Dhabi Environment

¹¹ The list of the past high-ranking visits between Japan and each of the GCC states is available on the country page of MOFA's website: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/middleeast.html>.

¹² The stagnation of their economic relations since 2019 was arguably due to several factors, including repeated attacks on oil tankers, political tensions in the Gulf region, falling oil prices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy. However, analysing these contributing factors is beyond the scope of this article.

¹³ Calculations are made based on the average annual exchange rates between Japanese yen and USD, which stand at 110 JPY/USD in 2018, 109 JPY/USD in 2019 and 106 JPY/USD in 2020.

¹⁴ See footnote 13 for the exchange rate on which the calculation is based.

¹⁵ The statistical data in this regard is only available for the Middle East but not for the GCC states.



Table 1 High-ranking visits between Japan and the GCC states

	To the GCC states	To Japan
1990–99	30	64
2000–09	129	114
2010–20	170	141

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the MOFA website (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/middleeast.html>)

See footnote 8

Agency's effort to revive the local pearling industry in the sea east of Abu Dhabi), energy efficiency (e.g. the Japan International Cooperation Agency's provision of a master energy plan for the Saudi Ministry of Electricity) and seawater desalination (e.g. the Japanese company Toyobo's high-tech desalination projects in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman), among many others.

The above data indicates that notwithstanding the limited literature on Japan-Gulf link, it has strengthened in recent years. As this paper will show, Tokyo's motivation to strengthen ties with the GCC states was—and still is—determined by a complex set of factors.

Japan's multifaceted diplomatic approaches vis-à-vis the GCC states

To understand the drivers behind the recent developments in Japan's relations with the GCC states, it is important to grasp the broader foreign policy imperatives that shape Tokyo's approach towards the region. This, in turn, helps to identify how the Japanese government situates the GCC states in its overall foreign policy strategies, revealing some of the key features of Japan's diplomatic approaches.

The importance of the GCC states within Japan's foreign policy priorities was clearly emphasised by relatively recent changes in the official vision of the Middle East's role in Japan's strategic thinking. Until 2017, the country officially declared the following three foreign policy tasks as the central pillars of its diplomacy: "(1) strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance, (2) enhancing relations with neighbouring countries, and (3) strengthening economic diplomacy as a means of driving the growth of the Japanese economy" (MOFA 2017a, 5). However, three new pillars were added with the appointment of Taro Kono as a foreign minister in August 2017. Among them was "the contribution to the peace and stability of the Middle East", thus prioritising Japan's Middle East presence (including the GCC states) over other items on Japan's foreign policy agenda (MOFA 2018, 6). Moreover, in 2017, Minister Kono insisted that the implementation of this new task was to be done in accordance with the so-called Kono Four Principles, implying "(i) intellectual and human contribution [in the development of the region], (ii) investment in 'people', (iii) enduring efforts [to achieve set targets], and (iv) enhancing political efforts [in the Middle Eastern affairs]" (MOFA 2017b, 3–4). Two other new strategic vectors of Japanese diplomacy added by Minister Kono—"the contribution to the resolution of global issues" and the concept of "the Free and Open Indo-Pacific"—also



contributed to the growing importance of the Middle East in Japan's eyes (MOFA 2018, 6).

Minister Kono's personal interests and experience played a significant role in this "turn to the Middle East". As he admitted in one of his speeches, the addition of the new pillar on the Middle East was largely due to his personal strategic preferences rather than the outcome of policy discussions among officials (MOFA 2017b). In fact, even before assuming the foreign minister's office, Minister Kono was actively engaged in Middle Eastern affairs as a Member of Parliament, including serving as the President of the Japan–Palestine Parliamentary Friendship Association. Among other factors, his strategic interest in the Middle East is arguably influenced by his father, Yohei Kono. The latter was the foreign minister of Japan between 1999 and 2001, during which he strove to strengthen Japan's ties with the resource-rich GCC states. For example, upon visiting Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 2001, Minister Yohei Kono announced a new initiative titled "Toward Multi-Layered Relations with the Gulf countries" (also known as the "Kono initiative") (MOFA 2002, 186).¹⁶ His 2001 initiative, which was intended to strengthen Japan–Gulf relations, came only a year after Japan's failure to extend its oil concession in the Saudi Arabian side of the Khafji oil field with the Saudi government. This development forced Tokyo to reformulate and diversify its foreign policy towards the GCC states (Kobayashi and Miyagi 2015; Watanabe 2022).

After the resignation of Foreign Minister Taro Kono in 2019 and the appointment of his successor Toshimitsu Motegi, increasing the country's presence in the Middle East remained one of the central pillars of Japanese diplomacy (MOFA 2021b, 2020, 2019). Moreover, by 2021, the scope of Japan's Middle Eastern interests had widened. Instead of "the contribution to the peace and stability of the Middle East", Japan's task was formulated as "addressing the situation in the Middle East". This implies that Japanese diplomacy can pursue a wider range of activities and, more importantly, a more flexible set of priorities (MOFA 2021a, 20). Following the appointment of the new Foreign Minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi, in November 2021, Middle Eastern affairs remained one of the country's diplomatic priorities (MOFA 2023b, 2022). The fact that the vision of the Middle East as one of Japan's key foreign policy vectors survived the resignations of both Foreign Minister Kono in 2019 and his successors shows that this initiative—initially largely personal but nonetheless strategic—managed to become incorporated into the country's foreign policy thinking. This development reflects the fact that by 2021, the following three drivers were increasingly motivating Tokyo to strengthen its ties with the GCC states via multidimensional approaches:

- (1) Japan's energy security concerns;
- (2) Japan's interest in widening the bilateral cooperation base with the GCC states beyond the oil and gas sector;

¹⁶ The purpose of this initiative was "strengthening Japan's diplomacy with the Gulf countries from a medium- and long-term perspective, and for building wide-ranging cooperative relations with the Gulf countries via personnel and cultural exchanges", the strategy that his son also pursued during his term between 2017 and 2019 (MOFA 2002, 186).



- (3) The growing geostrategic importance of the GCC states for Japan's wider cross-regional foreign policy aspirations.

Japan's energy security and the GCC states

It is not widely known that Japan itself is an oil-producing country, as it produces crude oil in various domestic oil fields located in, for example, Akita and Niigata prefectures as well as the island of Hokkaido.¹⁷ However, its production volume is so low that, since the 1970s, Japan's crude oil self-sufficiency rate has been less than 0.5%. As a result, the country has been significantly dependent on oil imports, almost all of which have historically come from the oil-producing GCC states (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2021). Despite the government's decades-long efforts to diversify its oil imports¹⁸ and increase energy efficiency,¹⁹ Japan still buys 91.2% of its oil import from the GCC states. Saudi Arabia (42.5%), the UAE (29.9%), Kuwait (8.6%) and Qatar (8.3%) are the top four largest exporters of crude oil to Japan, while Bahrain (1.5%) and Oman (0.4%) also exported crude oil to the country in 2020 (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2022). Moreover, the official trade statistics published by the Ministry of Finance (2021a) show that all the GCC states except Bahrain (and Oman in 2015) have been among the top ten crude oil exporters to Japan between 1995 and 2020.²⁰ In this context, the importance of the hydrocarbon-rich GCC states to Japan's energy security is clearly articulated in the key official documents reflecting the Japanese government's view of these states. For example, the MOFA's diplomatic bluebook has explicitly stated that "the Gulf states are important partners for Japan from the perspective of Japan's energy security" for the past several years (MOFA 2021b, 127; also see MOFA 2023b, 2022, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017a).²¹

¹⁷ The first geological survey for oil fields in Japan dates back as far as 1869, followed by the first machinery oil excavation in the Amase oil field in Niigata prefecture in 1891. Oil became a national strategic resource when the Imperial Japanese Navy decided to shift its fuel from coal to oil in 1921. See Nakajima (2015) for a detailed account of Japan's history of oil and its ties with the Middle East.

¹⁸ In light of Japan's heavy dependence on Middle Eastern oil and the political instability in the region, the Japanese government has historically tried to diversify its oil imports, favouring non-Middle Eastern countries (e.g. China, Indonesia and Mexico in the 1960s, 70s and 80s as well as Russia between 2010 and 2015; Agency for Natural Resources and Energy of Japan 2021; Kobayashi and Miyagi 2015). However, these efforts have met with limited success, and the country continues to rely on the GCC states for nearly 90 percent of its oil imports today (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy of Japan 2021).

¹⁹ Today, Japan is one of the world's top countries for energy efficiency. The Japanese government's efforts to increase energy efficiency can be traced back to the Act on Rational Use of Energy formulated in 1979, following consecutive energy crises in the 1970s. Miyagi and Kobayashi (2015) argue that "the experience of consecutive oil crises and the ensuing panic gave a strong psychological incentive to save energy among the Japanese public that has played an indispensable role in the improvement of energy efficiency in the residential sector since the 1970s" (65–66).

²⁰ It is highly probable that the same can be said for the period before 1995. However, the relevant statistical data is not available.

²¹ In a broader Middle Eastern context, Miyagi (2008, 61) similarly contended that "Japanese policy-makers have believed that Japan has a vital interest in the stability of the Middle East, with episodes of instability viewed as being the main threat to oil supplies and moderate prices".



As for natural gas, Japan's reliance on the Middle East, which stood at only 17% in 2019, is much less severe than in the case of crude oil (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy of Japan 2021). However, Japan had to increase its imports of liquified natural gas (LNG) from Qatar after the 2011 incident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and the subsequent suspension of its nuclear power industry (Wright 2017). Qatari LNG was a convenient option for Japan's sudden and unexpected LNG demand since, as Kobayashi and Miyagi (2015) point out, "most of Qatar's LNG was not tied to a specific buyer on a long-term contract, unlike most other LNG suppliers" (70–71; Ason 2019). That said, from 2022 onwards Japan's import of Qatari LNG considerably declined due to its failure to renew the 25-year contract (1997–2021) to purchase four-million-tonnes of Qatari LNG every year. The profound lack of domestic energy supply, as well as the heavy reliance on oil and gas imports from the GCC states, have led the Japanese government to engage in several policies aimed at ensuring the country's energy security in both the international and domestic realms.

In the international arena, for example, the heavy dependence of Japan on Gulf hydrocarbons led Prime Minister Abe to engage in mediation diplomacy in the Gulf region between mid-2019 and early 2020. This period saw escalating political tensions between Iran and the GCC states following a series of attacks on tankers in the region. In assuming the mediator role, the Japanese government had an advantageous diplomatic position vis-à-vis other global powers, including the USA, as Japan has historically maintained amicable diplomatic relations with both the GCC states and Iran. In this regard, Narayanappa Janardhan (2021) points out that both "Japan's self-interest in ensuring energy security" and "its unique position as a partner of the United States, Iran, and Gulf Arab states" motivated its mediation diplomacy (para. 2). Part of this diplomacy involved official visits by Prime Minister Abe to both sides of the Gulf (Iran in 2019 and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman in 2020). During these visits, he persuaded the regional leaders to avoid direct military confrontations in the region; such conflict would seriously threaten Japan's energy security, as most of Japan's oil tankers navigate through the Strait of Hormuz (MOFA 2021b).

Moreover, in December 2019, instead of joining the US-led coalition, the Japanese cabinet decided to dispatch the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) to the Gulf of Oman, the northern part of the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden "to gather information necessary for securing safe navigation of Japan-affiliated vessels as part of the government's safety navigation measures" (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan 2019, para. 6). Notably, the Strait of Hormuz was carefully excluded from JSDF's maritime operations to maintain Tokyo's neutral position towards both sides of the Gulf. The Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain at that time, Hideki Ito, explained that the cabinet's decision was

to ensure the safety of navigation in this region on which Japan depends 90% of its oil import. This decision is also accompanied by Japan's determination to undertake further diplomatic efforts towards easing tensions and stabilizing the situation in the Middle East. (Ito 2020, 11)



After the cabinet decision, Prime Minister Abe and Foreign Minister Kono contacted the leaders of the concerned countries in the Gulf region to assure them that Japan's intention was purely to secure the safe navigation of oil and LNG tankers in the region, not to engage in military intimidation.²²

In Japan's domestic realm, the country's heavy dependence on hydrocarbon supplies from the Middle East, among other factors, led to the Japanese government's formulation of the "New International Resource Strategy" (NIRS) in 2020. According to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, NIRS is designed to serve as a compass for securing Japan's stable and low-cost energy supply while considering environmental and safety factors (METI 2020). It consists of three main pillars: reinforcing oil and LNG security, reinforcing metallic mineral security and responding to climate change. These pillars include forms of energy other than hydrocarbons, such as coal and ammonia fuel cells (METI 2020).

One example of the implementation of NIRS is the 2021 launch of the Council for Cooperation with the Middle East Oil Producing Countries (METI 2021, 2020).²³ This council's primary purpose is to offer a platform for the Japanese government agencies, think tanks and private energy companies to coordinate policy concerning Japan's energy security vis-à-vis the Middle East (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2020). The initiative is innovative given that, as the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy (2020) admits, such collective policy coordination has previously been absent in Japan. This situation has forced each oil-related organisation to individually establish ties with oil-producing countries in the region.²⁴ The government's motivation for promoting such public-private partnerships is partially driven by a bitter experience: the Japan-US consortium's 2009 defeat by the South Korean consortium in a bid for nuclear power plant construction in the UAE (known as the "Abu Dhabi shock" in Japan) (Kobayashi and Miyagi 2015). Kobayashi and Miyagi (2015) point out that it was after this shocking defeat that "Japan stepped up its strengthening cooperation between the government and the private sector in promoting Japan's business to the Gulf states" (80). Hence, the council is expected to enhance its members' collective ties with the region's oil-producing states, thereby helping to secure a stable energy supply for Japan (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2020).

The second example concerns Japan's domestic oil stockpiling strategy. The history of Japan's strategic oil stockpiling dates back to 1975, when the "Petroleum

²² Japan's cautious approach towards political crises in the Middle East is not new. With a few exceptions, such as the deployment of the JSDF to the Southern part of Iraq in 2004 following the Iraq War, its security policy towards the region has traditionally been centred on "a cautious, energy security-focused approach that reflects caution, neutrality, and the avoidance of military entanglements" (Boduszynski et al. 2019, para. 4).

²³ Its first conference was held online in May 2021. Its agenda, though only in Japanese, can be obtained from the website of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan: https://www.meti.go.jp/shingikai/energy_environment/chuto_sanyu/001.html.

²⁴ Thorarinnsson (2018, 6) aptly points out that "Japanese oil firms are historically fragmented and are, to a varying degree, independent actors with different objectives, capabilities, and relationships both with their own government and with those in oil-producing countries".



Stockpiling Law” was enacted following the 1973 oil crisis. This law obligated the national government and private companies to store a certain amount of oil domestically to ensure the country’s energy security.²⁵²⁶ As of March 2022, Japan stores a total of 7,4180,000 kilolitres (equivalent to 470 million barrels or 146 days of domestic consumption) of oil. The stockpile is held by the national government, private companies and joint oil storage projects with foreign countries (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2022).

Since 2009, the Japanese government has been cooperating with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait on joint oil storage projects to boost its energy security from inside the country. These joint projects are aimed at allowing crude oil from the three GCC states to be stored in some of the oil terminals in Japan free of charge. During normal times, the oil tanks are used as hubs for oil sales to East Asia, but during energy crises, Japan has priority for purchasing the crude oil directly from these tanks. Hence, the joint projects are beneficial for both Japan and the three oil-producing states. As of 2020, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company has stored its crude oil in Kiire terminal in Kagoshima prefecture (600,000 kilolitres, equivalent to 3.77 million barrels when the project started in 2009). Meanwhile, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company has stored its crude oil in the Okinawa Oil terminal in Okinawa prefecture (600,000 kilolitres, equivalent to 3.77 million barrels when the project started in 2011). The Kuwait National Petroleum Company, which joined the joint project in December 2020, reached an agreement with the Japanese government to store 500,000 kilolitres (equivalent to 4.26 million barrels) of its crude oil in Japan, further accelerating Japan’s energy security from inside the country (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2021).

Moving beyond energy security

Japan’s strategic interests towards the GCC states are not limited to energy security but also extend to cooperation in non-energy sectors. For example, Japan’s MOFA (2021b) clearly states that.

Japan recently has been striving to strengthen its relations with Middle Eastern countries [including the GCC states] in a wide range of fields that include not only the economy but also politics and security as well as cultural and people-to-people exchanges. (21)

Japan’s policy shift from hydrocarbon-centric to multidimensional ties with the GCC states can be explained largely by its experience of several energy crises in the past decades. These include the oil crises in the 1970s; Japan’s failure to preserve

²⁵ The law was later amended in 1981 to require stockpiling of LNG.

²⁶ In the past, the national government occasionally ordered private companies to release part of their stockpiled oil during energy crises, including the 1979–80 oil shock and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, while maintaining the nationally stockpiled oil intact. At the end of 2021, however, the national government decided for the first time to release part of the government-held oil amidst the global energy crisis, followed by a similar announcement in April 2022.



its share of the Japanese oil company “Arabian Oil” in the Saudi Arabian part of the Khafji oil field in 2000, as well as its equity on the Kuwaiti side of the same oil field in 2003; and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, which led to a complete suspension of the nuclear energy industry that has ended only recently (Kobayashi and Miyagi 2015). Yukiko Miyagi and her colleagues (2013) argue that.

As a result [of several energy crises for Japan between the 1970s and 2011], Japan started promoting diversification and deepening of relationships with the Gulf beyond the one-dimensional trade relation, towards policy consultation over issues of common concerns, promotion of other forms of economic relations such as investment and tourism, and intensifying exchanges at various levels ranging from high-ranking officials to business representatives to the youth of both countries. (320)

This kind of multidimensional foreign policy approach going beyond the traditional oil and gas sector can already be observed, for example, in the Japanese government’s “comprehensive partnerships” strategy with each of the GCC states in the past decade (Nakamura 2016).²⁷²⁸ The bilateral comprehensive partnerships, though not legally binding, explicitly identify the fields of bilateral cooperation to which both sides intend to commit. While the content of the “comprehensive partnerships” can vary in detail, the general set of cooperation areas is quite wide and includes multiple types of partnerships in politics, security, economy, and cultural exchange. For example, the 2013 comprehensive partnerships signed with Bahrain include cooperation in politics, security, economy, agriculture, medicine, culture and human exchange (MOFA 2013).²⁹³⁰

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the bilateral comprehensive partnership known as “Saudi-Japan Vision 2030” was launched in 2017 by Prime Minister Abe and King Salman bin Abdulaziz as a “compass of new partnership”; the partnership was later updated in 2019 (METI 2019, 2). The motive for launching such a joint vision was to connect Saudi Arabia’s “Saudi Vision 2030”—the kingdom’s policy blueprint for innovative social and economic reforms—with Japan’s national growth strategy.

²⁷ The contents of each partnership can be obtained from the official website of MOFA in both Japanese and English.

²⁸ Nakamura (2016, 14) contends in the context of Japan-Qatar ties that their comprehensive partnership, launched in 2013, “can be interpreted as the diversification of their relationship beyond the trade of energy for technology”.

²⁹ It should be noted, however, that the Japanese government’s comprehensive partnership strategy is not exclusive to the GCC states; Japan has also concluded similar partnerships with other countries worldwide.

³⁰ For example, their cooperation in the field of human exchange includes the acceleration of youth exchange between the two countries, along with other GCC states, under government-led international youth exchange programmes. One such effort is the Ship for World Youth (SWY) programme, which has been hosted by the Japanese government since 1988. The SWY programme historically built a bridge for young people between Japan and the GCC states (except for Saudi Arabia). The programme thus deserves more scholarly attention, particularly with respect to the non-energy dimension of the Japan-Gulf ties. Details on the SWY programme can be obtained from the website of the Cabinet Office of Japan: <https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/kouryu/index-e.html#about>.



Accordingly, the joint vision states that its aim is “to develop a strategic partnership which will serve our [Japan’s and Saudi Arabia’s] economy and our future prosperity by creating a synergy of our two strategies” (METI 2019, 2). With respect to non-hydrocarbon bilateral cooperation, the joint vision identifies ten bilateral cooperation fields that include, yet also go beyond, oil and gas: the establishment of “enablers”,³¹ support for competitive industry development, energy and environment, infrastructural improvements, entertainment industry, healthcare and medicines, food and agriculture, investment and finance, capacity-building for small and medium enterprises, culture, sports and education (METI 2019, 1).³² Among them, Japan and Saudi Arabia have particularly targeted renewable energy (e.g. solar energy, exemplified by the 2019 announcement of Japan’s Soft Bank Vision Fund to invest in the Saudi solar energy sector) and entertainment (e.g. the promotion of Japanese anime by Saudi’s Manga Productions who signed an agreement for cooperation with Japan’s Toei Animation in 2017) (Yamada 2023).

While the “Saudi-Japan Vision” does not have legally binding power, its signing provided a foundation for the development of bilateral relations: as of October 2019, the number of projects launched or under implementation reached 69, up from 31 when the vision was first launched in 2017. Meanwhile, the number of participating public and private entities increased from 41 to 65 (METI 2019), offering further evidence of the diversification of Japan–Gulf cooperation beyond the traditional hydrocarbon sector.³³

Japan’s cross-regional foreign policy aspirations and the GCC states

The geostrategic importance of the GCC states for Japan is also intertwined with Tokyo’s wider cross-regional foreign policy aspirations (Matsuda 2023). The Gulf region is perceived as a geostrategically important region within the framework of Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), which was formally announced in 2016 and updated in March 2023 as a de-facto counter policy to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Matsuda 2023; MOD 2020; MOFA 2021c, 2023a; Nagy 2021).³⁴ FOIP has acquired worldwide support, including from the USA, Australia, ASEAN, EU and India (MOD 2021; MOFA 2021d). The strategy aims to support the development of ties between Asia and Africa by protecting the politically and

³¹ This term refers to the opening of vision project offices in both countries to enable the execution of relevant projects. This includes the Japanese government’s opening of Vision Office Riyadh in 2018 and the Saudi government’s 2020 announcement to open the Vision Office in Tokyo (METI 2019).

³² The latest version of this vision can be obtained from the website of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan: <https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2019/10/20191024005/20191024005-2.pdf>.

³³ This section selected Japan’s “comprehensive partnerships” with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as primary examples. However, it should be noted that the comprehensive partnerships that Japan concluded with other GCC states also provide evidence of the diversification of Japan–Gulf cooperation beyond the hydrocarbon trade domain.

³⁴ A detailed explanation of the original version of Japan’s FOIP is available on the MOFA website: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html. The 2023 updated version can also be found on the MOFA website: https://www.mofa.go.jp/tp/pc/page3e_001336.html.



economically free and open Indo-Pacific, thereby counterbalancing the growing Chinese influence in the region (Matsuda 2023; MOFA 2021a, 2021c).³⁵ To achieve this objective, FOIP identifies the following three tasks of Japanese diplomacy: (1) “promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc.”, (2) “pursuit of economic prosperity” and (3) “commitment for peace and stability” in the area connecting Asia and Africa (MOFA 2021a, 2). In this respect, the Gulf region, which is geographically located at the crossroads between Asia and Africa—and through which a large number of Japan’s tankers pass daily—is one of the most geostrategically crucial locations for Japan.

In contrast to China, which can access the Gulf region by both land and sea,³⁶ Japan’s oil and gas imports must rely on the sea lane alone, which stretches between the Gulf region and Japan, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. Hence, in the eyes of Japan, protecting the Indo-Pacific region means protecting a crucial route for oil and gas imports (Ishiguro 2014). That is arguably why the Ministry of Defense of Japan has promoted its cooperation on defence equipment and technology with the GCC states. This move is exemplified by the May 2023 conclusion of Japan-UAE agreement for the transfer of defence equipment and technology, first of its kind in the Middle East (MOFA 2023c). Moreover, the number of JSDF vessels’ visits to the Gulf ports (e.g. Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain) increased in recent years (MOD 2020). Furthermore, the Japanese government has participated in international security conferences held in the Middle East, including the GCC states, as part of its effort to promote the cross-regional policy framework. This includes Foreign Minister Kono’s attendance at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain in 2017 and 2018,³⁷ during which he gave a speech emphasising the importance of the Middle East in Japan’s FOIP strategy. He stated that

The Middle East geopolitically connects Asia and Africa, and has become a hub of energy resources, financial dealings, and commodity distribution, with several critically important maritime chokepoints. For these reasons, the Middle East is vital to our “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”. (MOFA 2017c, 10).

Echoing this statement, Hideki Ito, then the Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain, stated that.

³⁵ To further counter the ever-growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan joined an inter-regional security framework with the USA, Australia and India (now known as the “Quad”). Its first meeting was held at a director level in 2017, followed by meetings at a ministerial level in 2019–20. Finally, September 2021 witnessed the first top-level meeting, followed by the second one in May 2022 and the third one in May 2023, during which FOIP was discussed by the leaders of the four countries.

³⁶ China’s efforts to secure its oil and gas imports routes are clearly demonstrated, for example, by its plan to invest in the development of Gwadar port in Pakistan, which is the gateway to the Gulf. Janardhan (2015) points out that “Beijing was keen to use Gwadar as a transit terminal for Iranian and African crude oil imports. A road, and eventually a pipeline, from Gwadar could give China the alternative supply route that it urgently needs and spur the development of its western provinces” (40). See also Umer (2018) for a discussion on regional policy implications of Pakistan-China cooperation on Gwadar Port.

³⁷ In 2019, he attended the dialogue as Defense Minister.



Japan advocates the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which values the Indo-Pacific region extending from the Asia-Pacific to the Indian Ocean, leading to the Middle East and Africa, as free and open international public commons. And we have every intention to accelerate cooperation with Bahrain, which is an island nation just like Japan and also is situated at a geopolitically important position, to achieve economic development and peace in the region. (Ito 2021, para. 5)

As China has been promoting its Belt and Road Initiative, which FOIP aims to counter, it is natural to assume that FOIP will remain one of the Japanese government's central cross-regional policy frameworks for years to come. This means that the GCC states will remain geostrategically important for Japan's cross-regional foreign policy aspirations.

Conclusion

This multi-sectoral analysis has demonstrated that in spite of the prevailing belief that the relations between Japan and the GCC states are primarily driven by the hydrocarbon trade, the Japanese authorities' efforts to strengthen their ties with the GCC states are determined by a more complex set of factors. These include not only Japan's energy security, but also its non-energy economic interests and geostrategic factors. Moreover, the study revealed the relevance and salience of a multi-sectoral analytical approach to Japan–GCC relations.

The analysis of existing scholarship revealed the scarcity of scholarly literature on Japan–Gulf ties, its relatively insufficient attention to Japanese primary sources and the dominance of the hydrocarbon-centric analytical approach. To address these issues, this study examined relations between Japan and the GCC states by incorporating often-overlooked primary sources in Japanese—particularly, Japanese official government documents—and employing a multi-sectoral analytical approach. This stands in contrast to the majority of the literature, which largely focuses on their hydrocarbon trade. The subsequent analysis of these documents showed that, notwithstanding the relatively limited scholarly attention towards Japan–Gulf ties, these relations have strengthened in recent years. This, in turn, was determined by the following three key drivers of Japan's foreign policy vis-à-vis the GCC states:

- (1) Japan's energy security concerns;
- (2) Japan's interest in widening the bilateral cooperation base with the GCC states beyond the oil and gas sector;
- (3) The growing geostrategic importance of the GCC states for Japan's wider cross-regional foreign policy aspirations.

It should be acknowledged that all three key drivers are directly and indirectly related to Japan's energy security calculus, which partially justifies the existing analytical tendency to focus on the hydrocarbon and trade domains of Japan–Gulf



relations. However, these key drivers are also important in themselves, and they lead to one conclusion: Japan's foreign policy approaches vis-à-vis the GCC states are not determined by hydrocarbon imports alone. Instead, they are diversified and developing in several dimensions not always related to the hydrocarbon trade. Consequently, to grasp the full complexity of Japan–Gulf relations, it is important to go beyond an analysis of the traditional hydrocarbon trade by employing multi-sectoral analysis. It is not a mere coincidence that scholars such as Janardhan (2021) advocate the significance and relevance of this multi-sectoral analytical approach to the issue while also acknowledging the continuing importance of the energy security factor:

The priorities of Gulf-Japan relations are changing. There will continue to be oil interdependence for decades to come, however engagement in non-oil sectors is increasing due to the emphasis on economic diversification as well as the turn to tech-based businesses during the coronavirus pandemic. (para. 16)

In light of the ongoing transformation of the global energy landscape, these findings have important implications for the future relations between Japan and the GCC states. By the 2020s, the global hydrocarbon market had substantially changed under the influence of several factors, including the US shale revolution and the beginning of the global energy transition to non-carbon fuels. This shift will inevitably affect the dynamics of Tokyo's relations with the GCC states. Nevertheless, it will not undermine the importance of these ties for Japan's energy security, but rather change the accents: instead of viewing the GCC states as important sources of oil and gas supplies, the Japanese leadership will become more interested in them as producers of eco-friendly energy sources such as blue ammonia and green hydrogen. In fact, this transformation has already begun. Since 2020, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been exporting test cargoes of blue ammonia to Japan. Moreover, in November 2021, Japan's Mitsui Group joined Abu Dhabi's Ruwais project, which includes the construction of a world-scale low-carbon blue ammonia facility (Ingram 2021, 2022).³⁸ As for hydrogen, in April 2021, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry signed a memorandum of cooperation on hydrogen with the UAE's Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure. These moves to extend cooperation into new energy sectors add to the understanding that hydrocarbons cannot be the only driver for ensuring the future sustainability of Japan's relations with the GCC states. Therefore, the recent development of the global energy landscape will likely accelerate the need for both sides to adopt multidimensional foreign policy approaches, emphasising the relevance and salience of the multi-sectoral analytical approach to the study of Japan–Gulf relations in the future.

³⁸ Mitsui joined this project as both an equity partner and produce off-taker (Ingram 2021, 2022).



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Declarations

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