

## THE CURRENT OIL AND NATURAL GAS POLICY OF THE EU AND THE PRC TOWARD THE GCC STATES

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**Abstract<sup>1</sup>:** *The authors explore the doctrinal roots of the European Union's (EU's) and People's Republic of China (PRC's) policies toward the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies in the oil and natural gas fields in the changing security environment. To this end, the authors analyse international treaties and other types of documentation, scientific papers and statistical data. The article describes successes and failures and compares the EU's and the PRC's approaches toward the GCC on the bilateral and multilateral levels in the energy sector due to the detailed analysis of cornerstone documentation.*

*This research article provides a thorough overview of the processes of forming the legal framework in the EU and the PRC toward the GCC. It characterizes the evolution of the Middle East policy of the EU and the PRC and reflects on the geopolitical factor in international relations. The authors outline the obstacles in developing international dialogue between the countries, with an accompanying mention of the steps that could not be implemented during cooperation, while being declared within the official agreements. Finally, the attention is drawn to the Russian factor and the influence of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the context of this issue.*

*The authors claim that a free trade area would refresh and deepen relations between the EU and the GCC. It is noted that relations between the PRC and the GCC are developing more intensively with mutual benefit for both parties. The EU and the PRC are interested in signing an FTA with the GCC, and this step will allow them to form strategic partnership*

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*mechanisms in the current security situation.*

**Keywords:** *EU, PRC, FTA, GCC, free trade area (FTA), agreement, security threats, oil and gas energy sector.*

**Rezumat:** *Politicile actuale ale UE și ale R.P.C. în domeniul petrolului și gazelor naturale față de statele Consiliului Cooperării al Golfului. Autorii explorează rădăcinile doctrinele actualelor politici ale Chinei și Uniunii Europene față de monarhiile din Golf, în domeniul petrolului și gazelor naturale. În acest scop, autorii analizează tratatele internaționale și alte tipuri de documente oficiale, lucrări științifice și date statistice. Articolul descrie succese și eșecuri, comparând abordările Chinei și ale UE în sectorul energetic față de statele din Golf, la niveluri bilaterale și multilaterale.*

*Demersul științific oferă o privire de ansamblu aprofundată asupra proceselor de formare a cadrului legal al relațiilor dintre UE și China pe de o parte, monarhiile din Golful Persic pe de altă parte, reflectând asupra factorului geopolitic în relațiile internaționale. Sunt evidențiate obstacolele în dezvoltarea dialogului internațional între țări, cu menționarea acțiunilor care nu au putut fi implementate practic în cursul cooperării, deși erau menționate în cadrul acordurilor oficiale. În sfârșit, se atrage atenția asupra factorului rus asupra respectivelor relații și a influenței războiului ruso-ucrainean în contextul acestei probleme.*

*Autorii articolului susțin că o zonă de liber schimb ar reîmprospăta și aprofunda relațiile dintre UE și Consiliul Cooperării din Golf. Se observă că relațiile dintre China și monarhiile din Golf se dezvoltă mai intens, cu beneficii reciproce pentru ambele părți. UE și China sunt interesate să semneze un Acord de Liber Schimb cu CCG, iar acest pas le va permite să formeze mecanisme de parteneriat strategic în situația actuală de securitate.*

## INTRODUCTION

The EU and the PRC are the greatest economies in terms of nominal GDP after the US. Both international actors are trading superpowers and global manufacturing centres. This makes the PRC and the EU dependent on other states with larger energy resource outputs and affordable prices for them. In particular, the EU is the second-largest oil importer, and the PRC has been the world's top buyer of crude oil and refined products since 2022<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the global status of the EU and the PRC is partially determined by their dependence on oil-exporting countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Nikos Roussanoglou, *Tankers: China is Now the Biggest Oil Importer in the World*, in "Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide", 2023 in <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/tankers-china-is-now-the-biggest-oil-importer-in-the-world/>. (Accessed on 01.02.2024).

An important role in this group of energy producers is played by the member states of the GCC. The GCC (1981) brings together the United Arab Emirates, the State of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, and the State of Kuwait, which are located within one of the most strategically meaningful regions in the world. The main aim of the organization is to coordinate policies in the fields of economy, finance, commerce, and culture between the member states. To this end, the Supreme Council was created as the highest authority of the organization, the Ministerial Council, and the Secretariat General, which is the advisory body to the Supreme Council<sup>3</sup>. Due to its location on the coasts of the Red Sea, the Northwest Indian Ocean, and the Strait of Hormuz, the GCC monarchies are close to maritime trade routes between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Simultaneously, the GCC has significant energy reserves and large production capacities (Table 1), making the cost of oil comparatively low. Due to the peculiarities of oil production in the GCC, the member states can quickly respond to changes in the global oil market and increase or cut production. Consequently, the GCC states located in the geostrategic region play a vital role as stabilizers of oil prices, which is beneficial both for oil-producing countries and for countries that depend on the supply of petroleum and petroleum-based products.

**Table 1. GCC monarchies oil reserves<sup>4</sup> and production<sup>5</sup> as of 2021**

Country	World Rank (Total Amount of Reserves)	Reserves (Bil- lion Barrels of Oil)	Production (Barrels per day)
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2	297,5	11 039
<b>Kuwait</b>	6	101,5	2686
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	7	97,8	3657
<b>Qatar</b>	13	25,2	1809
<b>Oman</b>	21	5,4	951
<b>Bahrain</b>	67	-	-

<sup>3</sup> *The Charter*, in <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx>. (Accessed on 17.02.2024).

<sup>4</sup> *Crude oil – proved reserves*, in “CIA World Factbook” 2021, in <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/field/crude-oil-proved-reserves/country-comparison>. (Accessed on 04.02.2024).

<sup>5</sup> *bp Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, in <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>. (Accessed on 04.02.2024).

The EU and the PRC are essential trading partners of the GCC. The latter is the most significant trade partner, exporting large amounts of goods, services, and technologies while importing energy products from the monarchies of the Gulf<sup>6</sup>. The EU is the GCC's second-largest trading partner while being less dependent on these states for energy<sup>7</sup>. Both the EU and the PRC are great innovation centres that can become a source of modernization of the GCC, specifically in promising areas of renewable energy, and are large energy importers.

### METHODOLOGY

The study of the dynamics of the formation of the energy policies of the EU and PRC with the GCC is extremely relevant considering the transformation of the security environment in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on the global security and energy markets. It can be assumed that the PRC will continue to expand the framework of relations with the GCC and deepen the mechanisms of bilateral relations with the states of the region as a whole. Now, the GCC member-states are the only ones that can meet the oil needs of the PRC. In addition to the deterioration of relations with the Russian Federation and the loss of the energy supply market, the EU will seek to intensify its presence in the GCC energy markets. Under these conditions, the EU focuses on developing a common energy policy, intensifying bilateral relations with the states of the region to offer the Gulf states clearer and more pragmatic mechanisms for political, trade, economic and security cooperation.

This article aims to compare the features of the doctrinal basis of the energy policies of the EU and China concerning GCC monarchies in the oil and gas sectors to identify the stages of its formation and the transformation of implementation mechanisms. The authors assume that, given the new security challenges caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, the EU will continue to focus on developing a common energy policy and strategy, moving away from the level of individual member states. At the same time, the key features of China's energy policy will be high industrial development rates and increased energy dependence on foreign oil and

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<sup>6</sup> *Beijing: China, GCC Complete 90% of Free Trade Agreement* in "Asharq Al-Awsat", 2024 in <https://english.aawsat.com/business/4822066-beijing-china-gcc-complete-90-free-trade-agreement>. (Accessed on 17.02.2024).

<sup>7</sup> *EU trade relations with the Gulf region. Facts, figures and latest developments*, in "European Commission", 2024 in [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/gulf-region\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/gulf-region_en). (Accessed on 14.02.2024).

gas imports. Despite several government initiatives to decarbonize the economy, traditional energy sources will continue to constitute the lion's share of the Chinese economy's consumption.

The documentation basis can be divided into three parts: statistical data, EU-related and PRC-related documents. Eurostat's analysis of EU–GCC trade provides us with an understanding of trade structure, dynamics and role of oil and oil-related products. The EU Energy Deals Tracker is a crucial tool in analysing the current trends in EU–GCC energy relations and the level of cooperation between both sides.

The EEC–GCC Cooperation Agreement (1989) provides valuable insight into the basis of energy cooperation between the EEC (now EU) and the GCC. Furthermore, European Strategies Global Europe: competing in the World (2006), European Security Strategy (2009) and A Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (2016) provide us with the European perspective on the GCC during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, a REPowerEU Plan and a Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Strategic Partnership with the Gulf (2022) provide us with the modern European view of energy cooperation with the GCC.

On the Chinese side, it is important to mention China's Energy Policy (2012) and Energy in China's New Era documents that give us a brief overview of the Chinese vision of energy relations, including energy relations with the monarchies of the Gulf. Additionally, China's Arab Policy (2016) defines the Chinese-specific goals and vision for the future of the energy relations with the GCC.

The research has used a systematic approach, which helped to consider the subject through the lens of aspects that interact with each other in a single space to reveal the meaning of various events to establish their relationship and interdependence. In addition, this method has made it possible to draw up a complete picture of the formation of the legal framework of relations between the EU and the PRC about the GCC states. The work has also used a method of research synthesis, which, in complex use, helped to determine the main stages of the interaction of states and analyse the geopolitical factors in the relations of international actors. Furthermore, the scientific work has used historical methods, which made it possible to trace the evolution of the Middle East policy of the EU and the PRC; event analysis helped to trace changes in the domestic political situation and external environment; content analysis aided in analysing the content of official regulatory documents. Prognostic methods have been used to forecast the prospects for deepening the EU's and the PRC's relations with the GCC.

## THE DOCTRINAL FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ENERGY POLICY TOWARD THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

The creation and expansion of the EU at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century put the issue of forming a common energy policy on the agenda, first outlined in the Lisbon Treaty (2007). Particularly, the Lisbon Treaty added Article 194 to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which stated that the EU's energy policy, together with the policies of the member states, should aim to ensure the functioning of the energy market, ensure the security of energy supply, promote energy efficiency and energy saving, and the development of new and renewable energy sources; and promote the interconnection of energy networks. However, importantly, the article confirms the inalienable right of member states to determine the conditions for using their energy resources, the freedom to choose between different energy sources, and the freedom to determine the general structure of their energy supply<sup>8</sup>. Thus, due to the guarantee in Article 194, the EU energy policy consists of various elements and different degrees of centralization. Partially centralized elements include climate policy and the establishment of internal market rules. In turn, decentralized elements include the security of energy supply, technology, and energy efficiency<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, given the new security challenges, the EU member states must transform the energy policy from the level of individual member states to a more integrated one. It can be demonstrated by the evolution of the EU's doctrinal approaches to the GCC.

Nowadays, the only treaty regulating energy relations between the European Union (at that time, the European Economic Community, EEC) and the GCC on a multilateral level is the Cooperation Agreement<sup>10</sup>. They signed it on February 20, 1989, for an indefinite period. The two sides defined three major goals of signing the treaty. First, the EEC and the GCC declared the desire to institutionalize

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<sup>8</sup> Consolidated version of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*. Part three – *Union policies and internal actions*. Title XXI – *Energy*, in [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu\\_2016/art\\_194/oj](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_194/oj) (Accessed on 16.07.2024).

<sup>9</sup> Lehmann P. *Towards a general Europeanization of EU Member States energy policies?* in "Economics of Energy & Environmental Policy", 2015 in [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/39006/ssoar-2014-strunz\\_et\\_al-Towards\\_a\\_general\\_Europeanization\\_of.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2014-strunz\\_et\\_al-Towards\\_a\\_general\\_Europeanization\\_of.pdf](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/39006/ssoar-2014-strunz_et_al-Towards_a_general_Europeanization_of.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2014-strunz_et_al-Towards_a_general_Europeanization_of.pdf) (Accessed on 14.07.2024).

<sup>10</sup> *EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement*, in [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tradoc\\_140300.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tradoc_140300.pdf) (Accessed on 23.12.2023).

relations. To this aim, both sides created a mechanism for cooperation named the Joint Council. Secondly, both sides wanted to raise economic cooperation. Therefore, the third goal was to diversify the economies of the GCC. This step would support not only the economies but also the stability of the whole Gulf region.

The treaty consists of twenty-six articles and deals with various fields of cooperation. The Sixth Article is specifically devoted to the energy sector and calls for a closer partnership in the energy field. In addition, the EU and the GCC should jointly analyse the oil and gas trade and constantly share information on the state of the energy sector and various energy policies. Both sides should train specialists jointly. Furthermore, the EU and the GCC declared that they would carry out research on renewable energy. The parties agreed to create a Joint Council, which should convene at least once yearly. Consequently, in the Fifteenth Article, it is noted that a Joint Committee on Cooperation should assist the Council in performing its duties.

In 1990, after the Cooperation Agreement came into force, the EEC and the GCC initiated negotiations on a free trade area (hereunder FTA). Unfortunately, there is a scientific consensus regarding the unsuccessful conclusion of the negotiations: it is closely related to disagreements in the energy sector. Expressly, the lobbying role of the European petrochemical industry<sup>11</sup> and EU climate policies are noted as the ones which hindered the signing of the agreement even after the resolution of the issue related to the standard external tariff and the GCC's accession to the GATT (WTO). Nevertheless, some scholars mention the refusal to cease subsidizing energy industries by the GCC member states as one of the reasons for the failure of the negotiations in addition to the lobbyists from the European petrochemical industry<sup>12</sup>. Finally, among the reasons for suspending the talks is the potential expansion of European investments and service companies into the GCC market. However, the role of the EU petrochemical sector is also acknowledged<sup>13</sup>.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Russian Federation drastically increased its energy presence in European markets while the GCC countries lost their oil export to the EU (Table 2). Given the geographical proximity and the economic

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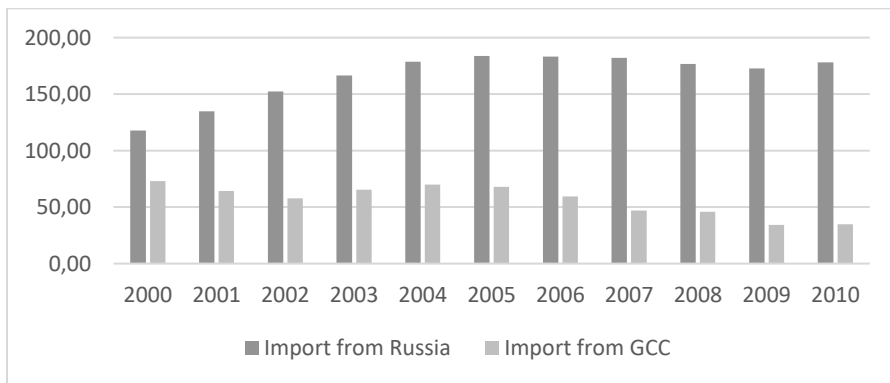
<sup>11</sup> Nivien Saleh, *The European Union and the Gulf States: A Growing Partnership*, in "Middle East Policy", 1999, vol. 7, p. 52-56.

<sup>12</sup> Rym Ayadi, Salim Gadi, *Trade and Investment Cooperation between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council: Current trends and future prospects*, in "Sharaka Commentaries", 2012, no. 2, December, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Rollo, *Prospects for an EU-Gulf Cooperation Council Free Trade Area. The World's First Region-to-Region FTA?*, in Chatham House, 2008: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Economics/bp0408ftagcc.pdf>. (Accessed on 14.12.2023)

advantage of pipeline gas over liquefied from the GCC, the Russian Federation had a clear advantage over the GCC. It was the interest in reliable long-term supplies of oil that pushed the EU to the Russian Federation and Russia's interest in stable and predictable markets pushed it to the EU<sup>14</sup>. According to the Canadian Energy Centre<sup>15</sup>, from 2005 to 2019, the Russian Federation provided almost 58% of the total European gas imports and the second-largest natural gas provider, Algeria, fulfilled about 30% of the EU's energy needs. In addition, from the last quarter of 2021 to the beginning of January 2022, the Russian Federation supplied 24–31% of all oil imports to the EU. Likewise, oil exporters such as the USA, Norway, Kazakhstan, Libya, and the United Kingdom had significant shares in the European market<sup>16</sup>. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia held a leading position in the European energy market, and this fact partly explains the pointlessness of EU energy market diversification, the search for new partners, and the lack of effective cooperation with the GCC.

**Table 2. EU oil import from Russia and the GCC (million tons)<sup>17</sup>**



<sup>14</sup> Debra Johnson, *EU-Russian energy policy – single or multiple policy paradigms?*, in “Energy & Environment”, 2004, Vol. 15, no. 3., p.451-468.

<sup>15</sup> Lennie Kaplan, Mark Milke, *EU Natural Gas Imports: €286 Billion Imported From Tyrannies and Autocracies Since 2005. For the past 15 years Russia has been the largest source of natural gas for European Union nations*, in “Canadian Energy Centre”, 2021, in <https://www.canadianenergycentre.ca/eu-natural-gas-imports-e286-billion-imported-from-tyrannies-and-autocracies-since-2005/> (Accessed on 5.01.2024).

<sup>16</sup> *Crude oil imports and prices: changes in 2022*, in “Eurostat. News Articles”, 2023, in <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230328-1> (Accessed on 5.01.2024).

<sup>17</sup> *Imports of oil and petroleum products by partner country*, in “Eurostat”, 2024 in [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nrg\\_ti\\_oil\\_custom\\_12043542/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nrg_ti_oil_custom_12043542/default/table?lang=en). (Accessed on 5.07.2024).



The superiority of the Russian Federation in the European energy markets has led to a decline in mutual interest in a joint FTA between the EU and the GCC. Thus, the narrowing of the EU's regional interests to security-related ones can be observed. According to the EU's first security strategy of the Union, the GCC are crucial partners in maintaining regional security against Iran<sup>18</sup>. Although the authors of the strategy briefly recognized the EU's dependence on energy supplies from the GCC, it was clear that energy issues were less important compared to security ones. Thirteen years later, the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS)<sup>19</sup> mentions the GCC's inseparability from Iran only in the context of a secure and stable EU periphery. The EUGS provided for interaction between the EU, the GCC and Iran in the context of the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to establish trade and cooperation in the scientific, environmental and energy fields, as well as in security.

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has brought severe changes not only to world politics but also to the global economy. In particular, drastic changes were made, first of all, in the energy sector. For the EU, it meant losing a significant energy supplier. This event pushed the EU to review its energy policy, turning its attention to other participants in the global energy market. On May 18, 2022, European institutions published three critical documents for European energy and relations with the GCC. One of the first was the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions REPowerEU Plan<sup>20</sup>. The paper is a further development of the main provisions laid out on March 8, 2022, by the European Commission. The authors of the document claim that Russia uses energy to put pressure on the EU and utilizes the money from energy sales to fund the war against Ukraine. The Communication is a plan on how to eliminate the European reliance on Russian energy. The additional goal is a faster transition to renewable energy sources. The EU plans to achieve energy independence from the Russian Federation with the help of four steps. These

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<sup>18</sup> *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe In A Better World.* in <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf> (Accessed on 13.12.2023).

<sup>19</sup> *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, in [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf) (Accessed on 14.12.2023).

<sup>20</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. REPowerEU Plan*, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0230> (Accessed on 16.12.2023).

steps are energy savings, substituting fossil fuels, accelerating Europe's clean energy transition, diversifying energy imports and, finally, smart investments into the energy sector. According to the document, three of the four significant steps to energy independence are internal European ones (energy savings, accelerating the green transition and investments in European energy) and one links to foreign policy (energy import diversification).

The same day, the European Commission issued a Joint Communication on EU External Energy Engagement in a Changing World<sup>21</sup>. The Communication is dedicated to relations with other foreign policy actors to overcome oil and natural gas dependence on the Russian Federation. The document praises Qatar as a reliable, liquefied natural gas supplier out of all GCC monarchies. Moreover, it is underlined that it is ready to contribute to the redirection of energy flows from Asian countries like Japan and Korea to the EU. The importance of the GCC for the EU is underlined by abundant resources for large-scale hydrogen production. The European Commission claims that GCC member-states have the potential to support the global transition to renewable energy. In addition, these states can invest in the EU's Mediterranean neighbours, where they hold a significant political and economic influence. This document is the EU's first attempt to influence bilateral energy relations, which have traditionally been the prerogative of individual EU member states. Particularly, it envisages establishing partnerships with other countries with substantial energy reserves worldwide through financial support, international assistance, technology transfer, and expanded trade relations. The EU seeks to develop ties within its competencies.

In the Third Communication<sup>22</sup>, published on the same day as the previous two, the European Commission states that it is willing to strengthen its ties with the GCC. The document is strongly influenced by the state of world security. In addition, the intention to level up relations with the GCC may be motivated by Iranian behaviour on the international stage and in the regional system. Iran continues to repress people at home despite mass protests from the West calling for change, it sells drones to help Russia in its war against Ukraine and continues to

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<sup>21</sup> *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "EU external energy engagement in a changing world"*, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022JC0023> (Accessed on 17.12.2023).

<sup>22</sup> *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf*, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022JC0013> (Accessed on 19.12.2023).

imprison European tourists demanding political and economic concessions in exchange for their release. There are six domains of possible cooperation mentioned in the paper. It is offered to cooperate economically on renewable energy and security issues. Moreover, the EU offers the GCC to coordinate their humanitarian aid, enhance people-to-people contacts and boost relations between political institutions. Energy cooperation is the second chapter in the Communication and the second-largest one. It is noted that deeper cooperation with the GCC could help the EU realize its other energy strategies mentioned in this paper and overcome its dependence on Russian fossils. The GCC can assist the EU in stabilizing oil prices by increasing its extraction. Furthermore, these countries can provide liquefied natural gas to the European markets by sea, substituting natural gas from Russia. As a result, the key interests of both sides mentioned in the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf paper include crucial areas for both the EU and the GCC, namely climate politics, energy, trade, finance and investment interests. The strategic partnership will help build trust between the EU and the GCC through closer contacts and more active EU involvement in the region's affairs (including a special representative). The EU is also actively involving the GCC in the climate agenda and the integration of energy networks. Even the title of the document underscores the Gulf's importance for the EU.

The document outlines the most promising areas of cooperation, in particular, hydrogen and renewable energies. The EU invites GCC states to join its Mediterranean Green Hydrogen Partnership initiative. Additionally, the EU is interested in developing the potential of the GCC in the wind and solar energy sectors. The EU offers to create a special expert group on energy and climate issues, which should include representatives from both the GCC and the EU. Finally, it is planned to hold annual meetings of the ministers of the EU and the GCC to discuss renewable energy issues, stimulate private initiatives and forums, and promote the creation of expert groups to identify potentially attractive initiatives for cooperation.

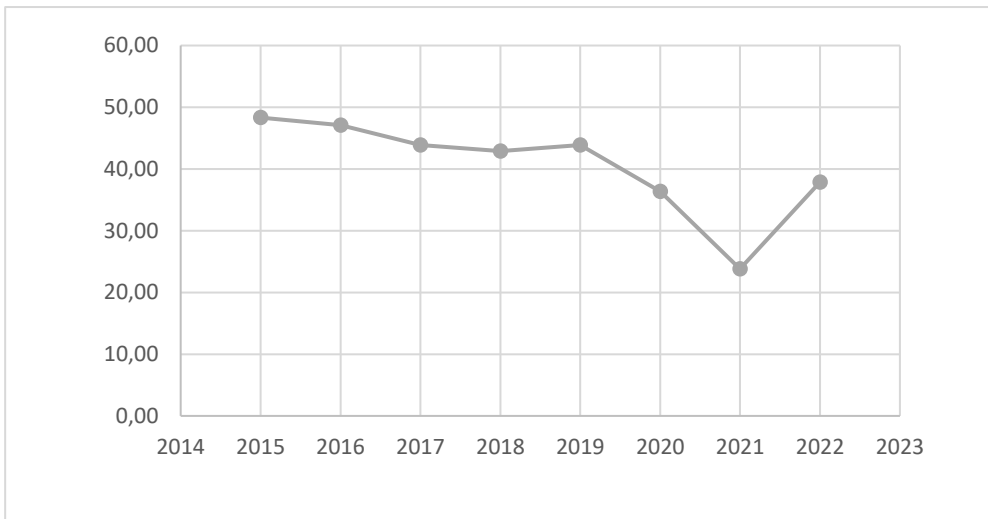
According to Eurostat<sup>23</sup>, in 2022, the size of EU imports from the GCC increased from forty to €87 billion, which is 115% compared to the previous year. In particular, the value of fuel imports increased by almost two and a half times from €25 billion in 2021 to €65 billion in 2022. Thus, energy products account for 74% of all GCC exports to EU member states and almost 8% of all European imports. In total, the EU is the second largest market for the GCC and its member states are the EU's 8<sup>th</sup> biggest trading partner. It is important to mention that, in

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<sup>23</sup> European Union, *Trade in goods with GCC*, in [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/region/details\\_gcc-6\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_gcc-6_en.pdf) (Accessed on 15.12.2023).

addition to the increase in import volumes, the increase in the value of imports from the GCC was influenced by the invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine and the high value of the US dollar. Thus, according to the US Energy Information Administration<sup>24</sup>, the medium price for a barrel of Brent oil in 2022 increased by almost 30% compared to 2021. Still, the oil imports from GCC rose by 37% in 2022 compared to the previous year (Table 3).

**Table 3. EU oil import from the GCC (Changes in per cent to the previous year)<sup>25</sup>**



Thus, one can trace the increase in pragmatism in the EU's policy in the Gulf region and towards the GCC particularly. Due to the deterioration of the security situation in the Middle East following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, as well as the escalation of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the EU began to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy by establishing trade ties with Iran and a security mission in the Strait of Hormuz<sup>26</sup>. The "Strategic Partnership" document continues

<sup>24</sup> *Crude oil prices increased in first-half 2022 and declined in second-half 2022*, in <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=55079> (Accessed on 15.12.2023).

<sup>25</sup> *Imports of oil and petroleum products by partner country* in "Eurostat", 2024 in [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nrg\\_ti\\_oil\\_custom\\_12043542/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nrg_ti_oil_custom_12043542/default/table?lang=en). (Accessed on 5.07.2024).

<sup>26</sup> Robert Mason, *The European Union's "Strategic Partnership With the Gulf": Half-Speed Ahead*, in "Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW)", 202, <https://agsiw.org/the-european-unions-strategic-partnership-with-the-gulf-half-speed-ahead/> (Accessed on 21.12.2023).

the EU's pragmatic approach: the EU has returned to a more pragmatic policy towards the Gulf states despite its previous emphasis on soft power. The new relationship strategy is highly Eurocentric, as it offers the GCC a list of areas where the EU is interested in deepening cooperation. Particularly, promoting "green" energy in the region will not only help diversify the GCC economies but also help the EU achieve its own energy goals and reduce its energy dependence on the Russian Federation<sup>27</sup>.

The EU has intensified political dialogue with the Gulf: high-level meetings have become more frequent. There is a call for greater pragmatism in Gulf policy: the EU needs a new approach to energy cooperation with the MENA states that meets both energy security and climate goals, and the GCC is a good test case for such an approach, thanks to their environmental ambitions, rich resources, and role in the fight against climate change. Still, the situation may worsen if the EU's status as an energy consumer is entrenched, reducing its influence on issues such as human rights<sup>28</sup>.

Despite certain intensification of bilateral relations, the EU and the GCC did not have an FTA. European interest in the region had been gradually declining and remained on the periphery of the European energy policy for a long time. Only the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to a reassessment of the European interests in the GCC in general and energy cooperation in particular. Regarding the current state of the EU–GCC relations after the Russian invasion, looking for other mutually beneficial points of contact is necessary, and energy and climate initiatives may become turning points. Nevertheless, it is essential to take into account changes in the security environment, like the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war, hybrid threats and the increased activity of Chinese foreign policy.

### **DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHINA'S ENERGY POLICY TOWARD THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL**

Considering that the Gulf is vital to the EU for foreign policy reasons, its importance to China is connected to domestic political reasons and closely tied to

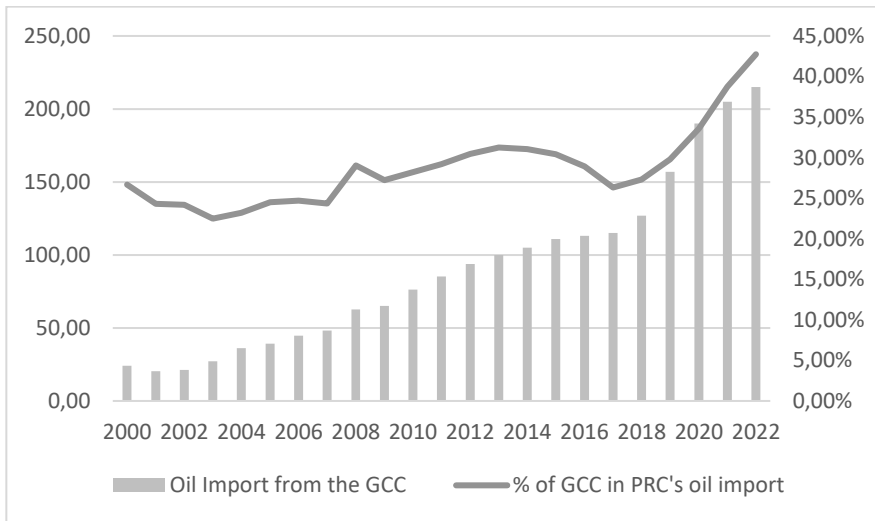
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<sup>27</sup> Timo Behr and Saskia van Genugten, *Can a new EU strategy bring EU and Gulf actors closer together?*, in "Middle East Institute", 2022, in <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-new-eu-strategy-bring-eu-and-gulf-actors-closer-together> (Accessed on 20.12.2023).

<sup>28</sup> Cinzia Bianco, *The EU'S Strategic Partnership with the Gulf: one year on*, in Brussels International Center, in <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/eus-strategic-partnership-gulf-one-year> (Accessed on 04.01.2024).

Chinese rapid economic growth. Cheap oil is necessary to sustain economic growth and create new jobs, and GCC monarchies can solve China's energy problems<sup>29</sup>. The development of trade relations between the PRC and the GCC states is one of the most rapid in the world. In 2000, the total trade volume between the PRC and the GCC was less than \$10 billion. However, by 2014, the bilateral trade between the PRC and the GCC states had increased significantly, reaching more than \$175 billion. A significant part of the trade balance consisted of energy resources from the GCC because, in total, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the UAE and the State of Kuwait provided 32% of the PRC's energy imports, with only energy resources from the Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman accounting for 16% and 10% of the total imports respectively<sup>30</sup>. Thus, the GCC member states play a vital role in Chinese energy security (Table 4).

**Table 4. GCC Crude Oil Export to the PRC (millions of tons)<sup>31</sup>**



The White Paper on China's Energy Policy 2012<sup>32</sup> is one of the primary doc-

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Fulton. *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*, Routledge, New York, 2019, P. 48-50.

<sup>30</sup> Xuming Qian, Jonathan Fulton, *China-Gulf Economic Relationship under the "Belt and Road" Initiative*, in "Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies" 2017, in <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/25765949.2017.12023306> (Accessed on 09.01.2024).

<sup>31</sup> *China-GCC Oil Trade Statistics* in "Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs", 2024 in <https://resourcetrade.earth/>. (Accessed on 5.07.2024).

<sup>32</sup> *China's Energy Policy*, in <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/>

uments explaining the PRC's energy policy. It investigates the threats to the economic security of the world's second-largest economy, such as limited domestic resources, low energy efficiency, the environmental impact of fossil fuels and growing dependence on imports. The document neither mentions any country in the Gulf region nor defines mechanisms for energy cooperation. In the context of the importance of collective international efforts to maintain energy security and dialogue, only OPEC is mentioned, whose members are major energy partners of the PRC like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. The PRC viewed the Middle East as an important and influential region in ensuring oil production, transportation and refining. With the help of its White Paper, the PRC called on the international community to support the sustainable development of the Middle East. In addition, Chinese authorities urged the global community to avoid politicizing the energy sector and to refrain from using force or armed force.

In 2016, on the eve of Xi Jinping's Middle East tour as the President of the PRC, a document, China's Arab Policy Paper<sup>33</sup>, was published on the official website of the Chinese government. The uniqueness of the Paper lies in the fact that this is the first strategy of the PRC concerning specific relations with the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa region, in particular, with the members of the Arab League, who actively participate in the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the PRC-GCC strategic dialogue<sup>34</sup>. It can be assumed that the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are the primary recipients of the document because the region is closer to the PRC than other Arab regions of the Mashreq and Maghreb. The GCC member states occupy a strategic position for implementing the maritime part of the Belt and Road Initiative and are also politically stable. It was with the Gulf states that the PRC developed the closest cooperation in the field of trade and investment.

The Paper did not propose any type of political integration. Still, it emphasized the traditional areas of cooperation for the PRC, such as the economy, energy, the fight against terrorism, security, technical cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Security is a key point as in the case of Iran, Saudi Arabia and their Sunni allies starting a regional war involving physical damage to oil infrastructure, crude oil prices will rise to the point of damaging the global economy. With a third of China's crude oil imports coming from the GCC alone, such a crisis would likely

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White%20Paper-%20China%27s%20Energy%20Policy%202012%20%28EN%29.pdf (Accessed on 06.01.2024).

<sup>33</sup> China's Arab Policy Paper, in [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2016/01/13/content\\_281475271412746.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2016/01/13/content_281475271412746.htm) (Accessed on 07.01.2024).

<sup>34</sup> *China-GCC Strategic Dialogue was launched in Beijing in 2010.*

hurt the PRC more than any other major economy. The Arab Policy Paper envisages cooperation in the '1+2+3' format, where the core is cooperation in the energy sector. The authors pay special attention to investments in the oil sector, particularly in the exploration of oil reserves, oil extraction and refinery. The two wings of cooperation in the document are infrastructure construction and trade, along with investments, which may also be indirectly related to the energy sector. The three breakthroughs should be nuclear and renewable energies and space technologies. The document reflects the critical interests of the PRC in the region, namely the interest in the oil supply and the trade expansion of Chinese technology companies to the GCC market; thus, the primary addressees of the Arab Policy Paper are the Gulf monarchies, which are crucial suppliers of energy resources to the PRC and have the necessary resources for cooperation in such areas as nuclear, renewable energy and space exploration. It is important to note that the '1+2+3' format for collaboration with the Arab states, as a whole, does not go beyond the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Joseph Webster and Jose Pelayo<sup>35</sup> claim that the share of the GCC member states in oil imports of the PRC increased from 30% in 2016 to 41% in 2022. Growth also occurred in absolute sales figures. In particular, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia increased oil sales from 50 million tons/year in 2016 to 90 million tons/year in 2022. Thus, the GCC might also hope for closer relations with the PRC because this will stimulate the return of the US to the region and make it more tolerant of regional policies<sup>36</sup>.

In 2020, a White Paper on Energy in China's New Era<sup>37</sup> was published on the website of the State Council of the PRC. This document aims to present the achievements and goals of the Chinese energy sector and outline its near future as well. Even though the White Paper is centred on the PRC, the authors point out the

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Webster and Jose Pelayo, *China is getting comfortable with the Gulf Cooperation Council. The West must pragmatically adapt to its growing regional influence*, in "Atlantic Council", 2023 in <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-is-getting-comfortable-with-the-gulf-cooperation-council-the-west-must-pragmatically-adapt-to-its-growing-regional-influence/> (Accessed on 10.01.2024).

<sup>36</sup> James Dorsey, *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom*, in *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 2017, Vol. 11, no. 1. in: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/25765949.2017.12023322?need-Access=true&role=button> (Accessed on 09.01.2024).

<sup>37</sup> *Energy in China's New Era*, in [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202012/21/content\\_WS5fe0572bc6d0f725769423cb.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202012/21/content_WS5fe0572bc6d0f725769423cb.html) (Accessed on 06.01.2024).



progress made as a part of the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the White Paper, trade barriers between energy markets should be removed globally. The Chinese government promotes trade and encourages investments. In addition, the PRC invited states from all over the world to improve energy infrastructure and work on further global integration.

Notably, the White Paper indicated that the PRC still cannot abandon traditional energy sources in the short-term and mid-term perspectives. The State Council of the PRC encourages energy companies to import more petrochemicals and develop local oil fields. Thus, it is safe to say that the energy cooperation between the PRC and the GCC countries will be on the rise.

It is worth noting that the PRC and the GCC held ten rounds of FTA negotiations between 2005 and 2022. Due to the substantial expansion of Beijing's cooperation with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain over the past year, the creation of an FTA between these countries is possible. The official government in Beijing hopes for a quick and successful conclusion of the negotiations soon. In 2022, the trade volume between the PRC and the GCC countries will reach \$315.8 billion. The PRC has also become the main trading partner of the GCC and the leading destination for the export of petrochemical products within the group<sup>38</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research demonstrate the different approaches the PRC and the EU are using towards the GCC. While the EU has a comprehensive set of documents regarding its GCC policy, the PRC does not have as much documentation on the matter. Still, the GCC plays an important role as an oil exporter to the PRC and at the same time shares a relatively small part of the EU's energy market.

It is worth noting that the EU's Strategic Partnership with the Gulf (2022) and the PRC's Arab Policy Paper (2016) are different types of documents that regulate the policies of the respective parties. Once the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started, the EU found itself in a confrontation with the leading provider of its energy needs. Thus, the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf can be considered as a part of the EU's response to significant political and security changes. On the other hand, the Arab Policy Paper of the PRC was adopted on the eve of the important visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Above

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<sup>38</sup> Nan Zhong, *China, GCC member economies keen to step up free trade talks*, in "China Daily", 2023, in <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/26/WS6539cd54a31090682a5ead84.html> (Accessed on 07.01.2024).

all, the visit took part in raising the PRC–Saudi relations to the level of a strategic partnership, so the Paper brings consistency to the relations between the PRC and the GCC and outlines the areas of possible cooperation.

The energy focus of the EU and Chinese documents is also worth noting. The second part of the EU's Strategic Partnership with the Gulf is devoted to energy. Specifically, the EU will strive to develop bilateral ties in energy investments, hydrogen production and preservation of biodiversity. Additionally, ministerial meetings should be held to deepen further cooperation. In the Arab Policy Paper, the Chinese leadership provides a less detailed list of possible areas of collaboration with an emphasis on the '1+2+3' formula and energy at its core but not limited to it.

While analysing the legal framework of the EU–GCC relations in the energy field, this article has underlined that a significant step forward is the creation of the FTA. The FTA mechanism will facilitate exchanging goods and services in multiple areas, including energy, allowing affordable prices for production and refining technologies and petrochemicals. As a step toward a mutually beneficial mechanism, the free trade area negotiations have been supported by both the scientists and the European Commission. To achieve this goal, the EU should engage in a dialogue with the GCC from the position of pragmatism, which can be observed in the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf document. Both sides ought to develop effective mechanisms of trade and investment cooperation to solve the regional security and energy problems, as well as issues connected to human rights, climate change, and asymmetric and hybrid threats<sup>39</sup>.

Moreover, the current research has indicated that the GCC does not play any major role in the European energy markets. The main obstacle for the GCC was the presence of the energy-rich Russian Federation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to the deterioration of the security situation on the whole continent. It has resulted in a complete overhaul of the EU's energy policy with sanctions and further removal of Russian presence on the European energy markets. The rise of energy imports from the GCC and the Joint Communication on the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf are among the other consequences of this overhaul. The declining security situation has made the EU interested in deeper cooperation with the GCC in the areas of stable energy prices, liquefied natural gas, and flawless climate transition.

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<sup>39</sup> *Training methods in the context of hybrid threats* (2023), edited by E. Balashov, M. Bilokon, T. Borozentseva et al., Kharkiv: TOV "Tekhnolohichnyi Tsentri Group". <https://doi.org/10.62067/978-617-8242-02-2>.

The article has identified that although the doctrinal basis of the PRC–GCC relations is relatively small, the bilateral trade relations are mutually beneficial, and both sides develop them intensively. The PRC avoids criticizing the internal policies of the GCC and does not intervene in regional affairs. Like the EU, the PRC is interested in the FTA with the GCC, which will allow it to deepen ties in the face of new security threats.

Given the arguments presented above, the hypothesis is proven. The research of the documentation related to the energy policies proves that after the beginning of the full-scale Russia–Ukraine war, the EU focuses more on developing a common energy policy and strategy, specifically through the External Energy Engagement in a Changing World and Strategic Partnership with the Gulf communications. There is a drastic change in the perception of the GCC within EU's doctrinal base towards a more pragmatic vision. At the same time, the key features of China's energy policy towards the GCC is focused on unimpeded access to the GCC's energy markets. The PRC is focusing on the traditional energy resources while leaving the cooperation in renewables for the future.

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