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The GCC as a Regional Operating System: Differentiated Sovereignty and the Future of Gulf Regionalism to 2030

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Abstract

GCC regionalism is still too often read through the wrong binaries: market integration or political union, success or failure. The Gulf now operates as a shared strategic environment shaped by maritime exposure, missile and drone vulnerability, cyber dependence, logistics corridors, energy continuity, digital infrastructure, and external chokepoints. Existing frameworks still capture parts of this reality, but they cannot describe the full object now being governed. The better lens is the GCC as a regional intelligence system, operating across a shared strategic stack and organized through differentiated sovereignty. On this view, regional order should be assessed by what it can actually do where fragmentation has become costly, not by its resemblance to a supranational model. For the GCC, the core functions are sensing, processing, coordination, memory, and adaptation.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, it reframes the Gulf as an operating system that already behaves as a security and interdependence complex, moving beyond familiar labels such as delayed Europe, weak alliance, or incomplete market. Second, it identifies the domains in which key sovereign functions have become difficult to perform at the national scale alone, especially external security, critical infrastructure continuity, and the governance of cross-border digital and logistics systems. Third, it advances functionally differentiated regionalism (summarized as 'separate markets, shared shield') and outlines a roadmap to 2030 built around selective pooling, interoperability, thin but purposeful institutions, and explicit trust-building safeguards. The most plausible future for the GCC lies neither in symbolic regionalism nor in a federal end-state, but in regional statecraft that preserves national diversity while building capability at the scale where the Gulf already operates.

Keywords

GCC; Gulf regionalism; differentiated sovereignty; regional intelligence system; strategic stack; regional statecraft; Gulf security; trust-building safeguards; institutional design; regional integration.

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Part I. Reframing the Problem

1. Introduction: Why the GCC Needs a New Theory of Regionalism

The Gulf now faces a problem of regional order that inherited vocabularies cannot describe well. For much of the past half century, regionalism was understood through familiar categories such as trade integration, diplomatic coordination, alliance formation, and, at its most ambitious, movement toward political union (Balassa, 1961; Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1998). Those categories captured real aspects of how neighboring states organized relations among themselves, but they belonged to an era in which regional order could still be described mainly through treaties, summits, tariffs, and formal institutions. That era has not disappeared, but it is insufficient (Hoffmann, 1966; Söderbaum, 2016). The GCC should be approached as a strategic system whose problems now exceed the older image of a market bloc or diplomatic forum. More specifically, it treats the GCC as a regional intelligence system operating across a shared strategic stack and organized through differentiated sovereignty. Put simply, the region's future lies in separate markets, shared shield (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Howorth, 2019; Söderbaum, 2016).

This argument also speaks to wider debates in new, comparative, and global regionalism. It builds on the insight that the European template cannot serve as the universal measure of regionalism. Regions are historically situated projects, shaped by their own patterns of interdependence, governance, institutional experimentation, and regionness. Comparative regionalism is useful precisely because it asks how different regional projects emerge, operate, and adapt under different political conditions. Measuring the GCC against the European integration template misses the point, and reducing it to a symbolic forum misses its strategic function. It should be read as a regional project whose form must be assessed against the environment it is trying to govern (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Söderbaum, 2016; De Lombaerde, 2024; Acharya et al., 2026).

Three propositions anchor the argument. First, the Gulf increasingly functions as a shared strategic stack: a layered environment of maritime routes, missile exposure, cyber dependence, energy continuity, logistics corridors, cloud systems, data infrastructures, payment rails, and regulatory interfaces in which the vulnerabilities of one state affect the condition of others (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Farrell & Newman, 2019). Second, sovereignty in this environment means effective capability: the credible performance of sovereign functions at the national scale (Howorth, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012). Third, if the region is to become more capable without becoming politically intolerable, its future must rest on differentiated sovereignty: a function-by-function distribution of regional forms bounded by trust-building safeguards, with no generalized move toward union (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

Together, these propositions lead to the paper's central concept: the GCC as a regional intelligence system. Intelligence here does not mean espionage in a narrow bureaucratic sense. It means the region-scale capacity to sense, process, coordinate, remember, and adapt across a shared strategic environment (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998). Gulf regionalism should be assessed by the functions it can build where fragmentation has become strategically costly. The Gulf's main regional problems are not well captured by the old binary of union versus fragmentation. The practical challenge is to build enough common awareness, interoperability, bounded pooling, continuity architecture, and safeguards for the region to remain strategically coherent under asymmetry and infrastructural interdependence.

Recent events show the problem clearly. Missile and drone attacks, maritime incidents, cyber disruptions, and infrastructure shocks in the Gulf rarely remain confined in significance to the state first affected. They alter shipping calculations, insurance pricing, continuity planning, investor sentiment, deterrence expectations, and external signaling across the wider region. The attacks on energy infrastructure, repeated stress on maritime routes, and cascading disruptions across logistics and digital systems all point to the same fact: the Gulf already behaves as a shared strategic environment even when its institutional architecture remains nationally segmented. That mismatch is the starting point. The argument also fits the GCC's own trajectory. Official GCC texts have long recognized the need for denser coordination across political, economic, and security fields. The GCC Charter established the Council as a cooperation system broader than a customs or market arrangement; the 2000 Joint Defense Agreement marked a clearer move toward collective security logic; the 2024 GCC Vision for Regional Security made the external and strategic dimension more explicit; and the Al-Ula Declaration of January 2021 reminded the region that reconciliation without architecture does not by itself produce standing capability (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC Secretariat General, 2013; GCC, 2024; Bahrain et al., 2021).

The paper's contribution is both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, it reframes the GCC as a candidate regional strategic system (Söderbaum, 2016). Practically, it proposes a path beyond the choice between full union and thin consultation. Regional capability, this paper argues, can be built through selective pooling, interoperability, shared operating layers, distributed nodes, and politically safeguarded institutional design without requiring over-concentration of authority or uniformity of development paths (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Three claims follow. Empirically, the Gulf already functions as a shared security and interdependence environment in which disruptions increasingly spill across the region. Conceptually, inherited frameworks misclassify this reality because they privilege visible institutional form over function under shared exposure. Normatively and institutionally, the GCC can remain strategically coherent only if regional capability is built through differentiated sovereignty, trust-building safeguards, and region-scale intelligence functions. These claims are organized around four questions: Which sovereign functions in the contemporary Gulf are now scale-mismatched with the nation-state acting alone? Why do inherited models of regionalism under-describe the GCC's present operating condition? What safeguards make regional capability politically trustable under asymmetry and limited trust? And what sequencing logic could move the GCC from symbolic coordination toward bounded regional statecraft by 2030?

The chapters that follow develop this argument in stages. Part I explains why inherited frameworks of regionalism are insufficient. Part II diagnoses the Gulf as a real regional security and interdependence complex, then reconsiders sovereignty, geoeconomics, and trust-building safeguards as constraints on future regional order. Part III develops the framework of functionally differentiated regionalism and the GCC as a regional intelligence system. Part IV turns to design, identifying functional domains, institutional principles, decision architecture, futures, and sequencing to 2030. The thesis is simple. The future of the Gulf lies in regional statecraft built around a shared strategic stack, differentiated sovereignty, and region-scale intelligence functions. Figure 1 summarizes this central claim. The GCC's most plausible future is a functionally differentiated middle path built around separate national markets and a shared regional shield.

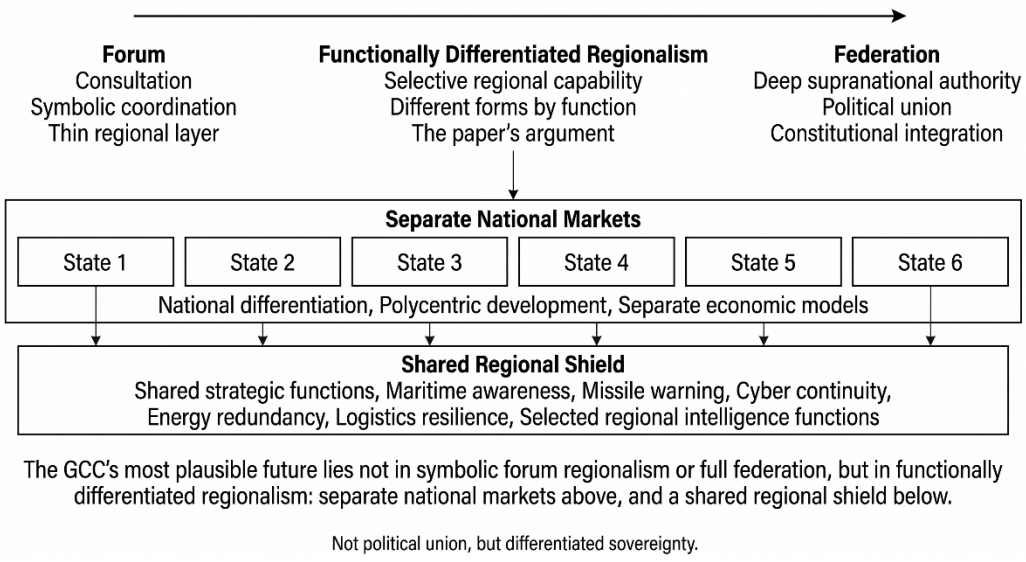

Figure 1. From Forum to Federation: The GCC's Middle Path

1.1 Why Inherited Regionalism is Insufficient

Inherited regionalism frameworks remain useful, but they do not exhaust the Gulf's problem. Older approaches were built around recognizable questions such as tariff reduction, market integration, diplomatic coordination, alliance formation, and movement toward political union (Balassa, 1961; Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1998). Nevertheless, they were shaped by an earlier object of analysis. They privileged visible institutional form over strategic function and assumed a cleaner distinction between economics and security than the Gulf's present condition allows (Söderbaum, 2016).

That limitation is especially serious in the Gulf. The region is increasingly a shared strategic environment in which maritime exposure, missile risk, cyber vulnerability, logistics corridors, cloud systems, energy continuity, and external chokepoints interact across borders (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The key issue is the adequacy of the region's architecture for governing a shared strategic stack. The sections that follow develop that critique in full and argue that Gulf regionalism must be rethought as a problem of statecraft under conditions of asymmetry, limited trust, and dense interdependence (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

1.2 Core Argument and Contribution of the Paper

The future of GCC regionalism lies in functionally differentiated sovereignty across a shared strategic stack. In shorthand: separate markets, shared shield. Economic sovereignty can remain nationally differentiated, polycentric, and competitively organized. But the external functions most essential to regional survival, such as warning, deterrence, maritime continuity, cyber resilience, strategic signaling, and selected infrastructure protection, cannot be governed effectively as if they belonged to six fully separable strategic environments. The Gulf does not need one economic model. It needs a more coherent strategic front. The better question is which sovereign functions can still be exercised effectively in isolation, and which now require regional arrangement if they are to remain viable (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). The paper makes two linked contributions:

- The first is conceptual: it reinterprets existing Gulf regionalism by shifting the object of analysis from formal institutional depth to regional capability under shared exposure. This explains what the GCC already is becoming;
- The second is design-oriented: it proposes how future Gulf regionalism could be organized through differentiated sovereignty, selective pooling, interoperability, and trust-building safeguards. This asks how it might be redesigned by 2030.

This argument rests on three linked propositions. First, sovereignty in the contemporary Gulf must be understood as effective capability, not just formal possession. States may retain legal autonomy while losing practical control over critical functions if those functions depend on infrastructures, platforms, warning systems, corridors, or strategic layers that no single state can govern alone (Howorth, 2019). Second, the region is increasingly constituted by a shared strategic stack. Security, infrastructure, logistics, energy, and digital systems are not cleanly separable domains. They interact, generate cascading dependencies, and blur the distinction between market and shield (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Farrell & Newman, 2019). Third, any viable Gulf regionalism must be politically safeguarded. Because the region is asymmetric, calls for pooling immediately raise the concerns about over-centralization. The future depends on institutional design that makes cooperation usable under limited trust through bounded mandates, distributed nodes, protected rights, and reversible commitments (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

This contribution is meant to speak directly to GCC realities. It takes seriously the region's institutional record, including security coordination after 2000 and the GCC's more explicit articulation of a regional security vision in 2024. These developments do not add up to a supranational order. They remain partial and uneven in practice. Still, they suggest that the Gulf's practical evolution has been less about constitutional union than about selectively thickening the regional layer where fragmentation has become operationally expensive (GCC Secretariat General, 2013; GCC, 2024). The paper brings these propositions into a single framework. It treats the GCC as a strategic system, defines regionalism as statecraft, and proposes differentiated sovereignty as the relevant design problem, replacing the stale binary of union versus fragmentation.

1.3 A Regional Intelligence Lens

The analytical lens organizing this paper is straightforward: the GCC should be approached as a candidate regional intelligence system. Intelligence here refers to the wider political and systems capacity of a region to understand its environment, organize shared awareness, convert information into judgment, preserve institutional learning, and revise its arrangements under changing conditions. The region must become more intelligent at the scale of the strategic environment it already inhabits (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998). This lens can be expressed through five core functions: sensing, processing, coordination, memory, and adaptation. These are not attributes of a unitary regional actor. They describe the distributed capacity of member states, acting through bounded regional mechanisms, to perform certain intelligence functions collectively where no single state can do so adequately alone (Holland, 1995; Maier, 1998). These five functions do not require a centralized Gulf super-state, nor do they imply that every sovereign function should move upward to the regional level. They provide an analytic way of reading the Gulf's regional problem and a standard for judging whether a future regional order is adequate to a shared strategic environment. The conceptual hierarchy is that: the regional intelligence system is the lens, the shared strategic stack is the object, and differentiated sovereignty is the design principle.

1.4 Method: Interpretive, Architectural, and Systems-Based Analysis

This paper adopts an interpretive, architectural, and systems-based method.

1. It is interpretive because its first task is conceptual reclassification: replacing inherited categories that predetermine success and failure with a more adequate object, the Gulf as a strategic system (Hoffmann, 1966; Söderbaum, 2016). Theory is used here in two distinct ways. First, it is used descriptively and explanatorily to clarify why inherited regionalism frameworks under-describe the Gulf's current condition and why the GCC functions as a regional security and interdependence complex. Second, it is used prescriptively and architecturally: to identify which functions should remain national, which require interoperability, and which may justify selective pooling. Theory carries two tasks here: reclassifying the object and guiding institutional design.
2. It is architectural because the argument concerns arrangement, layering, and design. The paper asks how functions are distributed across levels, how institutions are bounded, how decision rights are structured, how interoperability is achieved, and how trust can be made operational under asymmetry (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Architecture here means the deliberate structuring of capability under conditions of limited trust, uneven power, and strategic interdependence.
3. It is systems-based because the region is approached as a field of interacting subsystems. Security, infrastructure, logistics, digital systems, energy, maritime exposure, and geoeconomic dependence are treated as layered and mutually conditioning (Maier, 1998).

The paper draws on three source types: GCC institutional and policy texts; secondary scholarship in comparative regionalism, Gulf security, sovereignty, mechanism design, infrastructure studies, and systems theory; and publicly discussed regional issue areas as illustrations of cross-border exposure, especially in maritime security, cyber continuity, logistics, energy, missile vulnerability, and strategic infrastructure.

The functional domains identified in Part IV of the paper are selected using three criteria: cross-border externality, time compression, and dual-use strategic significance. In other words, the test is whether failure in one node predictably affects others, whether the domain requires coordination faster than ordinary diplomatic pace allows, and whether the system affects both economic continuity and sovereign capability (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Parker et al., 2016).

The study is conceptual and design-oriented, with no quantitative model of GCC integration or exhaustive institutional history. Its validity rests on triangulation across institutional texts, regional issue areas, and comparative theory. A serious counterargument would need to show that the Gulf's major strategic functions can still be credibly governed through nationally isolated architectures without major regional costs. The argument advanced here is that this has become progressively less plausible across an expanding range of domains. The scenarios developed later in the paper are heuristic devices for clarifying the consequences of design choice, institutional drift, and sequencing. They are not precise forecasts (Maier, 1998).

2. The Regionalism Trap: Why Existing Frameworks Are Insufficient

The GCC does not suffer from an absence of regionalism so much as from the inadequacy of the frameworks through which regionalism is still commonly framed. Much of the literature was built around older regional questions: how states lower trade barriers, align against threats, create institutions, and move toward higher forms of political union (Balassa, 1961; Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Mitrany, 1943; Moravcsik, 1998). Those questions are important, but they cannot capture the full character of regional order in the Gulf because they isolate one dimension of the problem while leaving aside the cumulative interaction of security exposure, infrastructural dependence, technological interconnection, strategic asymmetry, and cross-domain vulnerability. The regional intelligence lens makes that weakness visible. They say too little about how a region sees, interprets, coordinates, remembers, and adapts across a shared strategic environment. They remain focused on institutional form, market integration, or alliance posture, while under-specifying the cognitive and operational functions that increasingly determine whether regional order is usable under stress.

This creates a regionalism trap. Contemporary regions are forced into inherited conceptual boxes: market, alliance, or proto-polity. If they do not fit neatly into one of those templates, they are judged deficient or incoherent. But this misreads regions whose strategic reality is layered, hybrid, and increasingly organized through systems that blur boundaries between economics and security, civil and military infrastructure, and national and regional function (Söderbaum, 2016). A useful distinction here is between regionalism and regionalization. Regionalism refers to deliberate projects, institutions, policies, and designs through which states seek to organize a region. Regionalization refers to the actual growth of cross-border interactions, flows, dependencies, and shared exposures, whether or not institutions have fully caught up. The Gulf's problem is that regionalization has advanced in strategic domains faster than regionalism has adapted institutionally. The region has acquired greater regionness through maritime exposure, energy continuity, infrastructure dependence, digital systems, and shared security risks, even where political integration remains limited (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; De Lombaerde et al., 2010; Söderbaum, 2016).

The Gulf is one of the clearest cases of this misfit. It cannot be reduced to an incomplete customs union, weak defense pact, or failed political community. It is becoming a region whose governing problem is the management of a shared strategic environment constituted by interdependent infrastructures, overlapping vulnerabilities, asymmetric power, and growing pressure for capability at a scale larger than the nation-state but smaller than the international system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Maier, 1998; Sandler, 2006). This chapter revisits the classical models and shows why, on their own, they are too thin for the Gulf case. It revisits the three inherited templates through which regionalism has most often been imagined, explains why reading the GCC through European integration alone is a category mistake, and shows why the argument must move toward a statecraft-centered theory of regional order.

2.1 The Classical Models: Market Integration, Security Alignment, Political Union

The first classical model understands regionalism as market integration. In this view, the region is primarily an economic space, and the central questions concern trade liberalization, customs unions, common markets, regulatory convergence, and the welfare effects of integration (Balassa, 1961; Mitrany, 1943; Viner, 1950). This tradition remains useful where the region's main problem is the reduction of transaction costs and the expansion of exchange. A second model understands regionalism as security alignment. Here the region is viewed primarily as a threat environment. States coordinate because they face shared dangers, external challengers, or common exposure to instability. Alliance theory, security community theory, and regional security complex theory all illuminate this dimension in different ways (Walt, 1987). A third model understands regionalism as movement toward political union. This view is associated most strongly with European integration theory, especially neofunctionalist and supranational readings of how sectoral cooperation can deepen into broader political authority (Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963). Regionalism here is ultimately about the upward transfer or joint exercise of rule-making power.

Each of these models captures something real. Market integration explains why regionalism can advance even without deep political convergence. Security alignment explains why threat environments often produce regional coordination before markets do. Political union explains why some regional projects develop institutional depth beyond ordinary diplomacy. Their weakness is that each treats one regional function as the core organizing principle and then reads the rest of the region through that lens (Hoffmann, 1966; Mitrany, 1943; Söderbaum, 2016). The argument developed here is closest to the functional tradition, but it departs from both classical functionalism and neofunctionalism in important ways. Like functionalism, it begins from practical needs. Cooperation should deepen where concrete problems require shared capacity. Like neofunctionalism, it recognizes that cooperation in one domain can create pressures for cooperation in adjacent domains. But the paper does not assume automatic spillover toward supranational authority or political union. In the Gulf, functional pressure is real, but it operates under conditions of asymmetry, limited trust, sovereignty sensitivity, and external-security exposure.

Functionally differentiated regionalism treats spillover as a constrained design problem shaped by politics, trust, and institutional limits. This is a design problem about allocating regional functions under political and institutional constraints. The objective is to maximize regional capability where fragmentation has become costly, while respecting sovereignty sensitivity, asymmetry, limited trust, and regime autonomy. The relevant trade-offs are capability versus autonomy, speed versus legitimacy, integration versus flexibility, and efficiency versus resilience. On this logic, some functions remain national, some become interoperable, and only selected functions are pooled where the strategic benefits of shared capability outweigh the political and institutional costs (Mitrany, 1943; Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

The limitation is sharper in the Gulf, where multiple logics coexist without collapsing into one another. The region is simultaneously a market space, a security complex, and a zone of strategic infrastructure. It contains economic competition, political asymmetry, military exposure, external dependence, and overlapping critical systems. No single classical model can absorb all of that without distortion. The GCC's own trajectory illustrates this mixed reality. Its Charter established a broad cooperation system spanning political, economic, security, legal, and developmental fields, not just a customs or market arrangement. The 2001 Economic Agreement reaffirmed the commercial dimension, while the 2000 Joint Defense Agreement and later security initiatives pointed toward selective thickening in strategic functions rather than movement toward supranational union (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2013). The GCC's actual record resists reduction to any single inherited model.

2.2 The Category Mistake of Reading the GCC Through European Integration Alone

One of the most persistent distortions in thinking about the GCC has been the implicit use of Europe as the benchmark of mature regionalism. This is not always stated openly. More often, it appears through assumptions about what counts as meaningful integration, which institutions signal regional success, and which trajectories imply historical progress. This creates a standing comparison in which the GCC appears as an underdeveloped or stalled version of a path first taken elsewhere (Söderbaum, 2016). This is the category mistake. Europe is a historically specific regional solution shaped by continental war, postwar reconstruction, Franco-German rivalry, American security underwriting, expanding legalism, and the long institutionalization of supranational rule (Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Lindberg, 1963; Moravcsik, 1998). Its path cannot simply be abstracted into a universal template. To do so is to confuse one regional form with regionalism as such.

Comparative regionalism has repeatedly warned against this move. Regions differ in their threat environments, scales of asymmetry, institutional traditions, legitimacy structures, and degrees of external penetration (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Söderbaum, 2016). Some remain intergovernmental by design. Some are functionally dense yet politically thin. Some produce regional public goods without approaching union. The useful comparison starts with the Gulf's own ecology of interdependence and the regional form that fits it. The Gulf differs from Europe in ways that are constitutive, not peripheral. It is more asymmetric internally, more exposed to rapid external-security shocks, and more dependent on infrastructures tied to global flows of energy, finance, logistics, and technology. Its states remain more sovereignty-sensitive, not only in legal form but in regime logic. The Gulf's practical problem is usable capability under shared vulnerability and limited trust (Lake, 2009). Reading the GCC through European integration alone asks the wrong question. It asks whether the Gulf has generated enough institutional thickness. The more useful question is whether it has identified the right scale for solving the problems that now define it. It asks whether the region is moving toward higher forms of union. The more useful question is whether it can build credible strategic function without constitutional convergence.

The GCC's recent history reinforces the point. The Al-Ula Declaration in January 2021 restored a minimum political basis for renewed cooperation after a period of divergence, but it did not settle the deeper design question of what kind of regional architecture the Gulf requires (Bahrain et al., 2021). Likewise, the GCC Vision for Regional Security adopted in 2024 did not point toward supranational union. It pointed toward a more explicit regional-security logic built around shared principles and common external concerns (GCC, 2024). The region's actual trajectory points toward selective, function-specific density, a path far removed from the European constitutional horizon. A more useful comparative lesson comes not from Europe alone, but from contrasting Europe with Southeast Asia. The European Union demonstrates the strengths and risks of deep economic centralization combined with persistently incomplete defense integration. ASEAN, by contrast, shows the strengths of economic polycentricity, but also the strategic weakness of fragmented foreign and security coordination. The lesson for the Gulf is that regional systems can misalign sovereignty design across domains: over-integrating markets while under-integrating external security, or preserving economic agility while leaving diplomacy and defense too thinly coordinated. The GCC's challenge is to avoid both errors by differentiating functions more deliberately.

2.3 Regionalism in an Age of Digital Interdependence and Strategic Infrastructure

If older regionalism privileged markets, formal institutions, and visible political coordination, contemporary regional order is increasingly shaped by strategic infrastructure. The region is now constituted not only through councils and treaties, but through platforms, cables, data centers, cloud architectures, ports, logistics corridors, payment systems, standards, and the technical interfaces that connect or separate them (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019). This is a structural transformation

of the regional problem. Digital interdependence and infrastructural coupling change both the meaning of vulnerability and the scale at which resilience must be organized. In a world of weaponized interdependence, network centrality, and chokepoint control, interconnection can be a source not only of efficiency but of coercion, excessive visibility over sensitive information, dependence, and cascading failure (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Katz & Shapiro, 1985). What appears commercial in peacetime may become strategic under pressure.

The Gulf sits directly inside this transformation. Its strategic position is inseparable from ports, maritime corridors, energy transport, logistics platforms, telecom networks, cloud capacity, and digital infrastructures increasingly tied to both state function and economic modernization. Many of these systems remain nationally owned or regulated. However, their operating significance is regional as they cross borders, generate spillovers, and create forms of mutual exposure that do not fit neatly into the old distinction between economy and security.

Existing regionalism frameworks struggle with this condition. Payment systems, digital identity layers, telecom standards, cloud architectures, and logistics networks now shape continuity of governance, making the old commercial-security divide too narrow. Civilian systems become dual-use, commercial dependence becomes strategic leverage, and infrastructure becomes part of the region's effective shield (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Katz & Shapiro, 1985). A regionalism adequate to this condition must think in terms of stacks, interfaces, and cross-domain resilience. It must ask which systems can remain nationally differentiated and which require interoperability, redundancy, or selective pooling. It must treat the region as a political association and a layered operating environment at the same time. Infrastructural geoeconomics is not a side issue within regional studies. It is increasingly central to what regional order is.

2.4 Toward a Statecraft-Centered Theory of Regional Order

Once the limits of inherited frameworks are acknowledged, the next step is to reconstruct regionalism theory around a different organizing question. That question is more complex than how regions integrate. It is how capability, sovereignty, and strategic function should be arranged across scales under conditions of complexity. This also connects regionalism to foreign policy analysis, because regional order is shaped not only by institutions and structures, but also by how states interpret threats, interests, choices, and room for maneuver (Hudson, 2014). The language of cooperation has become too weak for the Gulf's present condition. Cooperation names a posture, but it does not specify what the region can actually do. States may cooperate diplomatically while remaining operationally fragmented. In a region increasingly shaped by missile exposure, maritime vulnerability, cyber dependence, and strategic infrastructure, the real issue is whether the Gulf can build usable capability across domains where fragmentation has become strategically costly (Maier, 1998; Sandler, 2006).

A statecraft-centered theory of regional order begins by rejecting two simplifications: that regionalism is primarily a moral aspiration toward unity, and that sovereignty is protected only when functions remain nationally insulated. Both fail in the Gulf. The region's problem is more than how to approximate a constitutional endpoint developed elsewhere. It is how to distribute function across the right scale while preserving political safeguards against over-centralization (Acharya, 2014; Lake, 2009). From this perspective, regional order becomes a design problem. Some functions may remain nationally competitive. Others may require harmonization, interoperability, shared platforms, or selective pooling. The region needs enough structured capability to govern the strategic environment it already inhabits. The paper reframes Gulf regionalism as statecraft and regional intelligence. The GCC's own record makes this shift easier to see. Its development has already combined economic coordination, selective security thickening, and renewed political framing around regional security without movement toward a supranational constitutional order (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2013; GCC, 2024). The practical question concerns the kind of regional architecture that can produce real capability under Gulf conditions. Abstract debates about whether the GCC should become "more integrated" are less useful.

2.5 GCC Scholarship and the Limits of Existing Debates

A conceptual critique alone would float above the GCC's own literature. That literature is substantial, but it has tended to cluster around a recurring set of questions: why the GCC was created, how far its economic integration has progressed, how its institutional design reflects structural asymmetry and smaller-state caution, and how episodes of intra-GCC tension have constrained regional cohesion. This scholarship is indispensable because it shows that Gulf regionalism has long been shaped by tension between cooperation and hierarchy rather than by any simple linear movement toward union.

Three strands are especially important. The first explains the GCC as a sovereignty-sensitive regional organization shaped by institutional caution, asymmetry, and limited forms of regionalization (Legrenzi, 2002; Gause, 2010). The second examines crisis, limited trust, and political strain within the GCC itself, particularly the way periods of intra-GCC divergence exposed the fragility of regional cohesion once common threat perception weakened (Ulrichsen, 2020a, 2020b). The third situates the GCC within a wider regional security order marked by rivalry, changing alignments, and infrastructural ambition, showing how Gulf cooperation unfolds within a competitive and asymmetric political environment (Baabood, 2023; Kamrava, 2025).

The paper uses that scholarship differently. Existing GCC studies help explain institutional caution, internal fracture, and the limits of traditional integration. The present argument builds on that literature by shifting the object of analysis. The GCC is treated as a candidate regional intelligence system operating across a shared strategic stack, while its intergovernmental form and troubled political history remain part of the analysis. The contribution is to connect GCC scholarship to a different object, a different evaluative lens, and a different design problem.

3. How to Think Regionally: Six Shifts in Strategic Perspective

Regional analysis in the Gulf requires a change in analytical posture: away from state-centric, static, and symbolic habits of thought, and toward systemic, performative, and architectural ones (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Maier, 1998). The six shifts below are corrections in how the object is seen. Together, they prepare the ground for the paper's central lens: the GCC as a regional intelligence system operating across a shared strategic stack. Their purpose is to align analysis more closely with the Gulf's actual condition: a politically plural but increasingly interdependent strategic environment whose most important problems are shared in function even when authority remains nationally organized.

3.1 From Country to System

Conventional analysis begins with the country as the default unit of analysis. A regional perspective begins instead with the system of interaction among states, infrastructures, and shared exposures. In the Gulf, maritime insecurity, missile risk, cyber disruption, and logistics vulnerability arise less from isolated national compartments than from the structure of the regional environment itself (Maier, 1998). Threats to shipping lanes, attacks on critical energy infrastructure, and instability affecting one state's external environment quickly alter calculations across the wider region. The relevant object of analysis is the regional system within which states operate. The GCC Vision for Regional Security in 2024 implicitly reflects this logic by framing security in explicitly regional rather than purely national terms (GCC, 2024).

3.2 From Sovereignty as Possession to Sovereignty as Performance

Conventional analysis treats sovereignty mainly as formal possession of authority. A regional perspective asks whether sovereign functions can still be performed effectively at the scale of the nation-state alone. In the Gulf, states may preserve legal autonomy while losing practical control over continuity, warning, and infrastructure-dependent functions (Howorth, 2019; Marks et al., 1996). Regional coordination in collective defense, strategic warning, and continuity-related domains has not emerged because member states became less sovereignty-conscious. It has emerged because some functions became harder to perform credibly in national isolation. Seen this way, sovereignty is preserved not by insulation alone, but by arranging functions at the scale where they remain effective (GCC Secretariat General, 2013).

3.3 From Independence to Interdependence

Conventional analysis emphasizes independence as insulation from others. A regional perspective starts from the fact that interdependence already exists and asks how it is structured, by whom, and to whose advantage. In the Gulf, trade, finance, logistics, energy, cloud systems, maritime corridors, and digital infrastructure create patterned dependencies that cannot be governed credibly through nationally isolated thinking alone (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The GCC's economic path, including the Economic Agreement of 2001 and the customs union launched in 2003, already recognized that the region's economic life did not fit neatly inside national compartments (GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2004). What has changed is that interdependence now extends more deeply into strategic infrastructure, digital systems, and continuity functions. The better question is whether the region has developed an adequate architecture to govern interdependence.

Interdependence should not be treated as an outdated concept. It remains essential, but the form of interdependence in the Gulf is changing. Intra-GCC trade and market integration may remain relatively limited compared with other regions, and Gulf economies may continue to be outward-looking in their main export relationships. But diversification, infrastructure expansion, digital systems, energy continuity, logistics corridors, and geopolitical constraints are likely to deepen functional interdependence even where economic structures remain nationally distinct. The important question is "which strategic systems now generate shared exposure, shared vulnerability, and shared requirements for continuity", more than "how much intra-regional trade exists" (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

3.4 From Borders to Flows

Conventional analysis privileges borders, territory, and jurisdiction as the main lines of regional explanation. A regional perspective pays closer attention to flows: goods, capital, data, energy, logistics, signals, and disruption moving through networks and corridors. In the Gulf, the region's strategic condition is increasingly shaped by what circulates across space rather than by what remains sealed within national containers (Cowen, 2014; Larkin, 2013). This shift is especially important in a region whose global significance rests on ports, sea lanes, energy exports, digital connectivity, and logistics centrality. Today, that logic extends well beyond commerce. It includes the movement of risk, data, cyber disruption, and continuity pressures across interconnected systems. Therefore, regional explanation must follow flows as much as borders.

3.5 From Union as the Only Model to Multiple Forms of Regionalism

Conventional analysis often assumes that meaningful regionalism culminates in union, and that anything short of that remains institutionally weak. A regional perspective recognizes multiple forms of regionalism. In the Gulf, the space between federation and stagnation is large, and much of the region's future is likely to be built there (Söderbaum, 2016). This wider perspective makes the GCC's actual record clearer. It has combined market-oriented arrangements, political consultation, selective security coordination, and increasingly explicit strategic framing without moving toward a supranational constitutional order (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2013; GCC, 2024). Meaningful regionalism can become strategically serious without culminating in federation.

3.6 From Intention to Architecture

Conventional analysis often treats regionalism as a matter of political intention: leaders want cooperation, states express solidarity, and common goals are declared. A regional perspective asks what architecture makes cooperation repeatable under real conditions of limited trust, uneven power, and tightly coupled systems. In the Gulf, strategic continuity will depend less on aspirational language than on how functions, interfaces, safeguards, and decision pathways are actually designed (Hurwicz, 1973; Maier, 1998). Recent GCC practice makes the difference clear. The Al-Ula Declaration in 2021 restored political cohesion after a period of divergence, but reconciliation alone did not create standing regional capability (Bahrain et al., 2021). Likewise, the GCC's 2024 security vision and the development of a Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy and a platform for sharing cybersecurity information point toward something more architectural: attempts to move from general solidarity to structured regional function (GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). The practical issue is what architecture makes cooperation durable, bounded, and operationally useful.

Part II. Diagnosing the Gulf

4. The Gulf as a Regional Security and Interdependence Complex

The Gulf is more than a diplomatic grouping or voluntary institutional arrangement. It is a real region in the strategic sense. Its member states occupy a shared environment in which geography, maritime exposure, energy infrastructure, missile vulnerability, digital dependence, external penetration, and asymmetric state capacity combine to produce a common field of risk and constraint (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Debates about the GCC still often proceed as if the central question were whether its members have cooperated enough, integrated enough, or converged enough politically. Before asking what kind of regionalism the Gulf should have, one must first understand why the Gulf is already regional in effect. The region exists as a strategic condition before it succeeds as an institutional project. That condition is created by proximity, exposure, and interdependence.

Therefore, the Gulf is best modelled as a regional security and interdependence complex. It is a security complex because the major threats faced by its states are regionally concentrated, rapidly transmissible, and difficult to isolate at the national level (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). It is an interdependence complex because the infrastructures through which continuity, prosperity, and strategic leverage now flow are cross-border in consequence even when nationally owned in law (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The two dimensions reinforce one another. Security is shaped by infrastructure, and infrastructure by geopolitics.

4.1 Geography, Proximity, and Shared Exposure

The Gulf is a region because its states are neighbors, and because they inhabit a compressed strategic space in which proximity magnifies exposure. Maritime routes are narrow and economically decisive, critical infrastructures are concentrated, and energy systems, airspace, sea lanes, and logistical corridors overlap within a relatively tight environment. Disruption in one part of the Gulf can quickly generate consequences across the wider region through shipping, energy pricing, investor perception, logistics interruption, or direct security escalation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Perrow, 1984).

Geography alone does not create political unity, but it creates the conditions under which interdependence acquires strategic force. In the Gulf, the combination of proximity, concentration, and global significance produces a level of strategic density that makes insulation difficult in practice, even where legal sovereignty remains separate. The region should be treated as more than a set of adjacent states, but as a shared exposure environment in which time, continuity, and awareness matter at the regional scale (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This is consistent with how the GCC has described itself. The Charter established a cooperation framework spanning political, economic, security, legal, and developmental fields, reflecting the region's already intertwined condition (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981).

4.2 External Threat, Internal Asymmetry, and Strategic Overlap

The Gulf's regional condition is shaped by the interaction of three structural features: external threat, internal asymmetry, and strategic overlap. External threat creates pressure for coordination because confrontation, maritime instability, missile exposure, and escalation risk rarely remain confined in meaning to one state alone (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Walt, 1987). Internal asymmetry complicates that response because the Gulf is not a region of near-equals; its states differ significantly in size, military depth, economic scale, and institutional weight, making deeper regionalization politically sensitive for smaller members (Lake, 2009; Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966). It is useful, however, to distinguish asymmetry of power from symmetry of exposure. Politically and militarily, the GCC is structurally asymmetric: member states differ significantly in size, depth, strategic weight, and institutional capacity. Economically, however, Gulf states also share several structural similarities: hydrocarbon dependence, outward-facing trade, reliance on maritime routes, exposure to global energy cycles, dependence on external technology and security providers, and vulnerability to disruptions in shipping, insurance, logistics, and investor confidence. The region is actually asymmetric in power but partially symmetric in exposure. Asymmetry explains the need for confidence-building and safeguards against over-centralization, while exposure symmetry explains why collective functions remain necessary despite legitimate political caution (Gause, 2010; Lake, 2009; Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Kamrava, 2025; Baabood, 2023).

At the same time, strategic overlap means that states that compete economically often depend on one another strategically. Their infrastructure spaces, threat environments, maritime exposure, and reputational risk environments intersect. This makes shared capability increasingly necessary in the Gulf, while keeping its design politically sensitive. The region brings together alliance politics, integration limits, power management, and systems governance in the same strategic space. The GCC's own security trajectory reflects this tension. The Joint Defense Agreement of 2000 and the 2013 decision to establish a Unified Military Command acknowledged that external threat and internal asymmetry had created a strategic environment in which purely national defense logic was not enough (GCC Secretariat General, 2013). These steps did not dissolve sovereignty. They showed that shared exposure was already pushing the region toward denser external coordination.

4.3 Maritime, Missile, Cyber, and Energy Interdependence

The Gulf's status as a regional interdependence complex becomes clearest in four domains: maritime security, missile vulnerability, cyber continuity, and energy infrastructure.

1. The first is maritime interdependence. The Gulf's commercial and strategic life depends on sea lanes, ports, chokepoints, and maritime corridors whose disruption would have region-wide effects. Maritime risk is not simply naval in character. It touches trade, insurance, logistics, energy export credibility, food supply chains, and strategic signaling. A threat to one corridor is a threat to the operating environment of the region as a whole (Cowen, 2014; Sandler, 2006). The GCC Vision for Regional Security makes this point directly by calling for stronger coordination to maintain maritime and waterways security and protect trade and energy supplies (GCC, 2024).
2. The second is missile interdependence. Missile and drone systems do not respect nationally siloed security thinking. Warning, interception, escalation management, and deterrent credibility are regionally entangled. Fragmented warning, fragmented air picture, and fragmented response architectures reduce regional effectiveness precisely where time, detection, and coordination are decisive (Walt, 1987). The 2024 regional security vision reflects this by identifying ballistic missiles and drone systems as regional challenges requiring stronger coordination and legal mechanisms (GCC, 2024).
3. The third is cyber interdependence. Digital systems are often governed nationally, but cyber continuity is increasingly regional in operational consequence. Telecom infrastructures, cloud dependencies, supply chains, standards, platforms, and cross-border service architectures create pathways through which disruption travels. A failure in one node can produce cascading effects elsewhere, especially where regional economies and governments depend on overlapping vendors, protocols, and connectivity layers (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Perrow, 1984). The GCC's 45th Supreme Council session in 2024 underlined this shift by endorsing the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and an information-sharing platform among member states, explicitly recognizing cybersecurity as part of the shared Gulf security system (Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024).
4. The fourth is energy interdependence. The Gulf's energy systems are often treated as symbols of national wealth and sovereignty. On the other hand, energy also creates a regional condition. Export routes, production reputations, infrastructure concentration, and continuity expectations all spill across borders. A disruption to one producer or transit environment can affect perceptions of the entire region's reliability. Energy security in the Gulf is both national in ownership and regional in strategic effect. This logic is reflected in the GCC's 2024 security vision, which links regional security directly to the stability of global energy markets and the avoidance of disruptions to trade and supply chains (GCC, 2024).

What unites these four domains is that fragmentation within them imposes regional costs. Maritime awareness that remains nationally compartmentalized, missile defense that lacks shared sensing, cyber governance that ignores cross-border dependencies, and energy security that overlooks corridor interdependence all preserve the appearance of sovereign separation while leaving the region collectively thinner in capability.

The GCC's recent security doctrine illustrates the empirical core of this study. The GCC Vision for Regional Security treats maritime security, freedom of navigation, the stability of energy supplies, and the protection of vital economic resources as shared regional concerns rather than purely national matters. That is analytically important because it reflects official recognition that disruption in these domains spills across borders through shipping, insurance, logistics, energy-market expectations, and wider strategic signaling. In other words, the region's operating condition is already more integrated than a nationally segmented institutional design would suggest. Maritime continuity and energy security in the Gulf are already regional in effect even when still unevenly regional in design.

Box 1: Shared exposure in practice: maritime security and energy continuity as regionalized risk
Sources: GCC, 2024; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Cowen, 2014

4.4 Why Fragmentation Produces Thinner Effective Sovereignty

Under conditions of dense interdependence, fragmentation does not preserve autonomy neutrally. It may preserve formal jurisdiction while weakening practical control over outcomes in domains where warning, continuity, and resilience already depend on region-scale awareness and coordination. The Gulf's fragmentation problem is institutional and sovereign at the same time. The next chapter turns to that sovereignty problem directly (Howorth, 2019; Maier, 1998). This is increasingly visible

in practice. Where critical awareness remains compartmentalized, where cyber continuity depends on overlapping infrastructures, where maritime disruption affects region-wide trade and insurance conditions, and where energy instability alters perceptions of Gulf reliability as a whole, formal sovereignty can coexist with operational thinness. Fragmentation in such contexts may preserve independence formally while reducing the ability of states to exercise control effectively.

4.5 The GCC as a Real Region, Even When Politically Incomplete

The GCC should be treated as a real region even when it remains politically incomplete. It has not become a union, generated deep supranational authority, or overcome asymmetry and periodic intra-regional tension. Its institutional thickness is uneven, and its strategic functions remain underdeveloped relative to the scale of its shared exposure. But none of this makes the Gulf less regional in the deeper sense. The region exists because its member states share a structured environment of proximity, overlapping threats, interdependent infrastructures, and mutual strategic consequences. Its incompleteness is political rather than ontological. The region is real even where its institutions lag behind its condition (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Söderbaum, 2016).

The GCC's own trajectory already hints at this logic of selective integration. The Joint Defense Agreement in 2000, the 2013 decision to establish a Unified Military Command, the Al-Ula restoration of political cohesion in 2021, and the more recent emphasis on shared regional-security principles and cybersecurity information-sharing all point in the same direction: not toward supranational over-concentration, but toward the gradual thickening of selected regional functions where fragmentation has become operationally costly (Bahrain et al., 2021; GCC, 2024; GCC Secretariat General, 2013; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). The better question is how to diagnose a region whose strategic reality already exists before its institutional design fully catches up. The Gulf is already regional in the sense that matters most for statecraft. Its problem is not whether it is a region, but whether it can build a regional order equal to the condition it already inhabits.

5. Sovereignty Reconsidered: From Formal Independence to Effective Capability

Sovereignty is often treated as the final argument against deeper regional arrangement: if authority is shared, sovereignty is weakened; if functions are pooled, autonomy is reduced. That intuition remains politically potent, especially in regions marked by asymmetry and limited trust. Analytically, that is too thin. The problem is that sovereignty is often treated only as formal possession: something states hold in law, defend in rhetoric, and lose when authority visibly moves beyond the national container. That captures one dimension of the concept. It misses a harder question: can sovereign functions still be performed effectively under conditions of interdependence, infrastructure dependence, time compression, and layered vulnerability? Once that question is asked, sovereignty becomes a matter of strategic capability as well as legal jurisdiction (Howorth, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012). This gap between the rhetoric of sovereignty and its strategic practice is not new. Stephen Krasner showed that sovereignty has rarely operated as a pure and indivisible principle in real international politics, while Hedley Bull showed that order among sovereign states is preserved not by isolation alone but also through institutions, rules, and shared practices (Krasner, 1999; Bull, 2012). For the Gulf, regional order is one of the means through which sovereign effectiveness can be preserved.

The GCC's own language already points in this direction. The Charter rests on the sovereignty and equality of member states, while the GCC Vision for Regional Security reaffirms sovereignty, non-interference, and good-neighborliness as foundational principles of regional order. On the other hand, the Joint Defense Agreement and the later development of the Unified Military Command also suggest recognition that some external and continuity functions cannot be performed credibly through symbolic autonomy alone (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC, 2024; GCC Secretariat General, 2013).

5.1 The Sovereignty Paradox in Small and Middle Powers

Small and middle powers defend sovereignty strongly because it is a rational shield against hierarchy, coercion, and over-concentration (Fox, 1959; Vital, 1967). Nevertheless, in tightly coupled regional environments, some of the functions most central to sovereign survival depend on systems, infrastructures, and deterrent environments that exceed the scale of the single state. The paradox is that legal enclosure may preserve formal independence while weakening practical capability, leaving the state sovereign in status but thinner in function (Howorth, 2019; Lake, 2009; Rothstein, 1968). In the Gulf, this paradox appears in different ways. Some states seek safeguards against over-concentration of regional authority. Others worry about the cost of unilateral burden-bearing. But all face the same structural problem: formal independence does not automatically translate into effective control

where threat, infrastructure, and interdependence exceed the national scale. The political problem is how to prevent sovereign caution from producing sovereign thinness.

5.2 Effective Sovereignty Versus Symbolic Autonomy

Symbolic autonomy refers to visible markers of sovereign independence: sole command, distinct institutions, and uncompromised legal jurisdiction. Effective sovereignty refers instead to whether the state can actually secure continuity, govern interfaces, anticipate threats, and act with usable control in the domains that matter (Howorth, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012). In the Gulf, strategic infrastructure and regional interdependence make that distinction important. The 2024 GCC Vision for Regional Security illustrates the point: it insists on sovereignty and non-interference while also framing maritime and energy security, regional stability, and freedom of navigation as shared regional concerns requiring coordinated management (GCC, 2024).

5.3 Why Certain Sovereign Functions Cannot Be Performed Alone

Once sovereignty is approached as performance, a more specific question follows: which sovereign functions cannot be performed credibly at the national scale alone? In the Gulf, four categories stand out:

1. The first is strategic awareness. No state, however capable, sees a regional environment entirely through its own sensors, institutions, or analytic channels. Maritime awareness, missile warning, cyber situational understanding, and corridor monitoring become more effective when information is fused across a broader operating picture; fragmentation produces blind spots, latency, and disjointed interpretation (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).
2. The second is continuity under disruption. Modern sovereignty depends not only on formal command, but on the uninterrupted functioning of critical systems: energy export pathways, digital infrastructure, telecoms, logistics, payments, and cross-border service dependencies. Where such systems are regionally entangled, continuity becomes difficult to guarantee through nationally siloed arrangements alone (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Perrow, 1984).
3. The third is deterrence credibility in selected domains, especially air and missile defense, maritime corridor security, and cyber resilience. Fragmented architectures reduce the credibility of detection, warning, and coordinated response precisely where time compression makes integration of function more valuable (Walt, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).
4. The fourth is strategic bargaining power. In domains shaped by standards, platforms, vendors, technological dependence, and infrastructure access, sovereignty increasingly depends on the ability to negotiate from scale. States acting separately may preserve formal independence while accepting weaker positions in relation to external providers, guarantors, and system-setters (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The GCC's own practice increasingly reflects this layered reality. Joint defense arrangements, the continued development of the Unified Military Command, and more recent regional initiatives in cybersecurity and shared information exchange all suggest recognition that some functions of warning, continuity, and external resilience are already regional in effect even when they remain politically sensitive in design (GCC Secretariat General, 2013; GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). The nation-state remains central, but some sovereign functions are now layered and must be organized accordingly.

5.4 Shared Capability Without Over-Concentration of Authority

The central political concern is straightforward. Even if some functions are more effectively performed through regional arrangement, why should states believe that shared capability will not become over-concentration of authority? In asymmetric regions, that concern is rational. Smaller members may worry that functionally justified pooling can create excessive dependence on a regional center, while larger members may be expected to carry greater responsibility for shared systems. The argument for regional capability cannot succeed unless it addresses that political design problem directly. The distinction matters. Shared capability means that certain functions are jointly enabled, interoperable, or selectively pooled because the strategic environment requires it. Over-concentration means that one node or regional center acquires excessive discretion over functions that remain politically sensitive for member states (Lake, 2009; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Shared capability can be organized through distributed nodes, bounded mandates, reversible commitments, protected rights, rotational functions, and domain-specific pooling, with safeguards that limit over-concentration and preserve national decision rights. The GCC Vision for

Regional Security is instructive here as it frames regional security cooperation around sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual respect, suggesting that any deeper regionalism in the Gulf will remain viable only if it is visibly organized within those limits (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; GCC, 2024).

5.5 Differentiated Sovereignty as a Design Principle

Sovereignty in the Gulf should be approached as differentiated rather than absolute in form. Differentiated sovereignty does not mean that some states are fully sovereign and others are not. It means that sovereign functions should be organized according to the scale at which they can be performed most effectively, while preserving political safeguards against over-centralization and institutional imbalance (Howorth, 2019; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Not all sovereign functions are alike. Some remain most effective when nationally controlled and nationally differentiated. Others benefit from shared standards, protocols, or interfaces. Others require distributed regional capabilities because the cost of fragmentation has become too high. The design problem is which functions should remain separate, which should become interoperable, and which should be selectively pooled under bounded institutional arrangements. This is also a question of optimum policy levels. Different public functions have different efficient and legitimate scales of governance. Some are best handled nationally because preferences, accountability, and political sensitivity remain strongly domestic. Others require regional arrangements because externalities, spillovers, or time-sensitive interdependence exceed the capacity of any one state acting alone. Differentiated sovereignty applies this logic to the Gulf by asking which functions should remain national, which should become interoperable, and which should be selectively pooled because the cost of fragmentation has become too high (Oates, 1972, 1999; Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

Differentiated sovereignty moves the analysis beyond the binary of full union versus institutional stagnation. It opens a middle ground in which the region can remain politically plural while becoming strategically denser. In the Gulf, this implies that maritime awareness, missile warning, cyber continuity, energy redundancy, and selected digital or infrastructural functions may be better secured through regional arrangements that stop short of political union but go beyond rhetorical cooperation. Sovereignty remains central to Gulf politics, but if it is reduced to visible autonomy alone, it risks becoming strategically thinner as shared exposure becomes denser. A future-oriented regionalism must therefore distinguish formal independence from effective capability, and redesign sovereign functions accordingly.

6. From Market Bloc to Strategic Stack: The New Object of Regionalism

The region is not organized only through markets, formal institutions, and visible political coordination. It is increasingly shaped by a wider and more consequential set of systems: cloud infrastructure, compute capacity, cables, logistics networks, payment rails, ports, digital platforms, telecom standards, energy continuity, and corridor resilience. These systems are not only background enablers of growth. They shape both economic performance and sovereign capability by affecting how states govern, absorb shocks, bargain with external powers, and preserve continuity under stress (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Larkin, 2013). For this reason, the market-bloc image has become too narrow. It describes one layer of regionalism while overlooking a deeper object, the region as a strategic stack. A strategic stack is a layered set of infrastructures, systems, protocols, dependencies, and operating functions whose interaction shapes the region's effective capability. It includes economic systems but is not reducible to them. It includes security systems but is not exhausted by military arrangements. It sits where economy, infrastructure, technology, and statecraft now converge.

A useful organizational principle follows from contingency theory: "different tasks require different institutional forms." As Lex Donaldson argues, institutions perform best when their structure fits the conditions of the task they are meant to govern. That matters here because the region's economic domains and its security-continuity domains do not generate the same organizational requirements. A framework adequate to customs, mobility, and commercial experimentation may be inadequate to missile warning, cyber continuity, or crisis coordination (Donaldson, 2001).

6.1 The Old Image: Customs, Mobility, and Economic Coordination

For much of its institutional life, the GCC was publicly imagined through the language of economic coordination. The region appeared as a project of customs integration, market access, labor mobility, regulatory alignment, infrastructure facilitation and investment cooperation (Balassa, 1961; Mitrany, 1943; Viner, 1950). In that older image, regional success

was measured through lower barriers, smoother movement, more convergent policy, and deeper commercial exchange. This image had real practical value. Economic coordination remains part of what the GCC does and what it was built to encourage. Trade facilitation, mobility arrangements, common standards, and investment integration still matter for a region whose prosperity depends on movement, exchange, and scale. The market-bloc frame should not be dismissed as mistaken. It captured the most visible layer of regionalism in an earlier period.

The GCC's institutional development reinforced that image. The Economic Agreement adopted in Muscat in December 2001 revised the earlier 1981 framework in order to deepen economic integration and advance projects such as the customs union and common market (GCC Secretariat General, 2001). The customs union itself came into force in January 2003, giving the GCC's market-building agenda a more concrete institutional form (GCC Secretariat General, 2004). But the agenda was also limited. It treated the region's economic life as largely separable from its security and infrastructure life and encouraged the view that regionalism was mainly about facilitating exchange rather than organizing capability (Balassa, 1961; Sandler, 2006; Viner, 1950). In the Gulf today, however, that image has become too shallow. Economic coordination has not disappeared, but it now sits inside a denser operating environment in which markets themselves depend on strategic infrastructures. The old image still describes one layer of the region, but not the decisive one.

6.2 The New Reality: Cloud, Compute, Cables, Logistics, Payments, Ports, and Platforms

The contemporary regional environment is shaped by systems whose strategic significance has expanded dramatically. Cloud architecture affects not only business services but the continuity of digital governance. Compute capacity increasingly conditions technological dependence and AI capability. Submarine cables and telecom networks shape not only communications, but resilience, redundancy, and exposure to disruption. Logistics networks, ports, payment systems, and platforms affect not only efficiency, but continuity, leverage, and operational flexibility (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Larkin, 2013). These systems now shape the practical conditions of sovereignty and regional power. In the Gulf, state modernization, digital government, logistics centrality, AI ambition, and platform-based service delivery are increasingly built on infrastructures whose operating logic is regional in consequence even when ownership, procurement, or regulation remains national. A cloud dependency, cable disruption, payments constraint, or logistics bottleneck may enter through one jurisdiction but quickly become a wider regional continuity problem.

The GCC's own official language has begun to reflect this shift. The GCC Vision for Regional Security adopted in 2024 explicitly links regional security not only to traditional strategic concerns but also to the security and stability of energy supplies, the stability of oil markets, maritime security and freedom of navigation, and the defense of vital economic resources (GCC, 2024). Much of what now constitutes regional order is carried by systems that operate beneath the formal political surface. Data moves before policy does. Payment systems structure possibilities before diplomatic declarations catch up. Cloud architecture can reconfigure practical dependence without any visible constitutional change. The Gulf's regional condition is increasingly infrastructural. It is shaped by the arrangement, vulnerability, and governance of systems through which both prosperity and continuity travel. The new reality is that the systems connecting Gulf economies have themselves become objects of statecraft.

6.3 Civilian Systems as Strategic Systems

One of the most consequential changes in contemporary regional order is that systems once treated as civilian, commercial, or technical now have direct strategic significance. Not every commercial asset is military. The point is narrower: continuity, leverage, and control have moved into domains that older regional vocabularies treated as secondary. Civilian systems become strategic when their disruption affects state function, crisis endurance, political autonomy, or regional stability. A logistics system is strategic when supply interruption alters national resilience. A cloud system is strategic when state services, data continuity, or AI capability depend on it. A payment system is strategic when exclusion from it constrains economic agency. A telecom or cable system is strategic when communication continuity and digital sovereignty rely on its stability. A platform is strategic when it controls the interface through which exchange, data, or coordination occurs (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

This shift changes what counts as regional capability. If civilian systems shape the continuity of governance, then they belong inside the regional strategic picture. For the Gulf, this is especially important because modernization has been pursued heavily through infrastructure, digitization, logistics, connectivity, and platform-based transformation. The same systems that power growth also structure dependence and vulnerability. Their governance cannot be treated as a purely domestic or purely market

matter. A regionalism adequate to this condition must be able to see civilian systems strategically without collapsing all civilian life into militarization. The point is narrower: continuity, leverage, and resilience increasingly run through infrastructures once treated as outside the core of statecraft.

6.4 Dual-Use Infrastructures and the End of the Market-Security Divide

The older market-bloc image rested on a workable distinction between economic regionalism and security regionalism. Markets concerned efficiency, trade, and welfare. Security concerned alliance, defense, and deterrence. That separation is becoming harder to sustain. The reason is dual-use infrastructure. Many of the systems now central to regional order serve both commercial and strategic purposes. Ports are trade infrastructure, but also strategic access points. Telecom systems support civilian communication, but also state continuity and security coordination. Cloud infrastructure powers business and government alike. Payment systems are commercial rails, but also tools of leverage and resilience. Logistics corridors support growth in ordinary times and determine endurance under crisis (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019). This has major implications for regionalism. A region cannot assume that market integration and strategic capability belong to separate institutional worlds. Infrastructures that support market coordination may also require strategic governance, and systems built for commercial efficiency may become critical under crisis. The market-security divide remains, but it has become analytically thinner. Many of the most important regional systems now sit precisely in the overlap (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Katz & Shapiro, 1985). For the Gulf, this overlap is especially pronounced because official strategic language now treats energy supplies, maritime security, freedom of navigation, and vital economic resources as part of one connected security field rather than separate policy silos (GCC, 2024). The consequence is that regional order must now be thought through dual-use architecture rather than through cleanly separated institutional spheres.

6.5 The GCC as a Layered Strategic Stack

Once the market-security divide is reconsidered, the concept of the strategic stack becomes possible. A strategic stack is a layered arrangement of systems whose interaction determines the region's effective capability. It includes infrastructure, information, protocols, governance layers, standards, operating functions, and resilience mechanisms. It is not a single institution or sector. It is the composite architecture through which the region senses, moves, connects, absorbs shocks, and acts. In the Gulf, this stack includes several interrelated layers, including a maritime and logistics layer of ports, corridors, shipping routes, and trade continuity systems; an energy layer of production, transmission, export infrastructure, and redundancy; a digital layer of data, telecoms, cloud, platforms, and compute; a financial layer of payment rails, confidence systems, and cross-border transactions; a regulatory layer of standards, interfaces, and rules of interoperability; and a security layer that overlays and interacts with all the others through awareness, warning, continuity, and protection (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Maier, 1998; Parker et al., 2016). The value of the stack concept is that it shows how regional order is now built less through one grand institutional leap than through the interaction of multiple strategic layers. A region may appear institutionally connected while remaining thinly integrated in the layers that matter most under stress. Conversely, it may remain politically plural while becoming strategically denser if those layers are made interoperable, resilient, and selectively pooled where necessary. The stack operates as a system only when its layers are connected by governance mechanisms like common standards, information interfaces, decision rights, escalation rules, feedback loops, and review processes that prevent progress in one layer from being blocked or undermined by failure in another.

To call the GCC a layered strategic stack is a diagnostic claim, not a metaphor for modernity. Trade and diplomacy alone cannot explain the region's future because what the GCC must govern has changed. Regionalism must determine how this stack is governed, where it remains nationally differentiated, where it becomes interoperable, and where it requires shared capability. The strategic stack is the operating environment for building regional intelligence functions.

7. The Geoeconomics of the Gulf: Competition, Dependence, and Shared Vulnerability

The Gulf is a region of shared exposure and geoeconomic competition at the same time. Its states seek position, scale, influence, and strategic advantage through infrastructure, logistics, platforms, finance, energy, digital capacity, and connectivity. That competition is often rational and productive. It has driven modernization, investment, institutional ambition, and the construction of globally connected hubs. It has also generated a paradox: the same strategies through which states seek national

advantage can, when pursued without regional design, deepen collective vulnerability. This is the geoeconomic problem of the Gulf. Regional actors compete to become indispensable nodes in global circuits of trade, data, finance, logistics, energy, aviation, and technology. Still, the more these nodes matter, the more the region's strategic condition comes to depend on infrastructures whose disruption, concentration, or external dependence can create shared fragility (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012). As a result, national ambition does not unfold inside a neutral regional environment. It helps reorganize that environment. Competition will not disappear and it should not. The region cannot remain purely competitive in domains where the consequences of failure are increasingly shared. That is where geoeconomics becomes central to regionalism. In the Gulf, exchange, national development strategies, infrastructural dependencies, and external power structures intersect in the same regional space. The GCC's own institutional history helps clarify this shift. The Economic Agreement of 2001 and the customs union that followed gave formal expression to the market-building dimension of Gulf regionalism. But the region's more recent strategic language has widened the lens by linking regional stability to maritime security, supply stability, energy security, cybersecurity, and the shared Gulf security system (GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2004; GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024).

7.1 Infrastructural Geoeconomics in the Gulf

Geoeconomics is often defined narrowly as the use of economic instruments for strategic ends. In the contemporary Gulf, the most important transformation is infrastructural geoeconomics. In other words, the way infrastructure itself becomes a medium of power, dependence, leverage, and strategic positioning (Cowen, 2014; Larkin, 2013; Krugman, 1991). Ports, corridors, cloud infrastructure, telecoms, logistics chains, payment systems, energy networks, and platforms are strategic assets because they shape access, continuity, exposure, and bargaining power. This is especially visible in the Gulf, where modernization has been pursued through infrastructural centrality. States have sought global relevance by becoming hubs of movement, finance, energy, logistics, aviation, digital services, and connectivity. National development and strategic competition increasingly run through the same systems. Because of this, geoeconomics cannot be treated as an external supplement to regionalism. In the Gulf, it is part of the region's internal structure. The region is shaped by who hosts the node, who governs the interface, who controls the route, and who can offer continuity when systems are stressed. Geography still matters in this setting, but increasingly through the location of hubs, corridors, routes, and concentrations of economic activity rather than territory alone (Krugman, 1991).

7.2 Hub Competition and Regional Fragmentation

One of the clearest expressions of Gulf geoeconomics is hub competition. States seek centrality in logistics, aviation, finance, digital services, cloud, data, platforms, and advanced technology. Such competition is often rational. Hub status yields scale, revenue, strategic relevance, and path-dependent advantage. But it also creates a regional tension, where nationally rational efforts to build centrality can produce fragmented standards, duplicated infrastructures, and weakly coordinated resilience. From a regional perspective, competition becomes a problem when it lacks connective design. When multiple states seek centrality in overlapping domains, the result may be productive specialization, but it may also be incompatible standards, institutional fragmentation, and insufficient interoperability. The region may become more advanced but less governable, and richer in nodes but thinner in connective logic. For the Gulf, this problem is especially significant because ambition itself has become infrastructural. Competition now occurs through ports, platforms, data centers, cloud ecosystems, energy routes, free zones, logistics chains, and institutional interfaces. When these are pursued in parallel without regional design, the outcome may be a region of impressive nodes and weak connective logic.

> The Gulf's recent development model has been driven by intense node-building: ports, aviation hubs, logistics corridors, financial centers, digital platforms, cloud infrastructure, and data ecosystems. This competition has produced real gains in scale, visibility, and global relevance. But it has also created a structural tension at the heart of Gulf regionalism. The same nationally rational strategies that strengthen individual hubs can fragment standards, duplicate systems, weaken interoperability, and leave regional resilience underbuilt. The region may become richer in assets while remaining thinner in connective logic. Competition is not the problem. Competition without architectural coordination can produce a more advanced but also more brittle regional order.

Box 2: Competitive modernization and fragmented architecture
Sources: Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019; Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Parker et al., 2016

7.3 Weaponized Interdependence and External Chokepoints

The geoeconomic problem of the Gulf includes both internal competition and external dependence. The region's strategic stack is deeply tied to global networks in which key nodes, standards, technologies, platforms, and access points may be governed or influenced from outside the region. This is the logic of weaponized interdependence. Systems that generate value can also become channels of leverage, exclusion, monitoring, or coercion (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Weaponized interdependence reflects the uneven structure of interdependence. Networks have hubs, chokepoints, gatekeepers, and asymmetries of access. Actors positioned near those points can shape the options available to others. This is especially important in payments, cloud, telecoms, semiconductor supply, digital platforms, advanced compute, logistics software, and standards regimes, where dependence may not appear as territorial control but can still constrain practical autonomy (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Hurwicz, 1973; Parker et al., 2016).

For the Gulf, this creates a dual challenge. Internally, states compete to improve their position within the regional and global system. Externally, they remain exposed to infrastructures, vendors, standards, and platforms whose governance lies beyond their control. This leads to national modernization that coexists with deep external dependency. The GCC's own security language increasingly recognizes this indirectly. The 2024 Vision for Regional Security emphasizes stability of supply, freedom of navigation, and the protection of vital resources and maritime routes, reflecting awareness that continuity in the Gulf depends on both national assets and externally exposed systems and routes (GCC, 2024). A regional response is not guaranteed. But external chokepoints strengthen the case for common standards, redundancy planning, shared bargaining positions, interoperable alternatives, and selective regional capabilities in domains where external dependence is individually expensive but collectively manageable.

7.4 Why National Success Can Create Regional Coordination Challenges

One important dynamic in the Gulf is that national success can create regional coordination challenges. Success is desirable, but it often concentrates capability, dependence, and strategic weight in ways that remain nationally beneficial while becoming regionally delicate. A successful node attracts flows. It accumulates centrality. It becomes more important to trade, finance, logistics, data, or digital services. But centrality also increases exposure. The more the system depends on a concentrated set of nodes, the more disruption at those nodes can reverberate across the region (Katz & Shapiro, 1985). Consequently, national success can create single points of regional consequence.

A second source of fragility arises from divergence. If one or more states race ahead in digital infrastructure, logistics capacity, regulatory sophistication, or platform development while regional interoperability remains weak, this might create a more advanced but less coherent regional system. Success then increases asymmetry faster than governance adapts to it. That may intensify smaller-state anxiety, deepen dependence on particular nodes, and make cooperative design politically harder precisely when it becomes strategically more necessary.

A third source of fragility arises from strategic substitution. If each state interprets regional strength as the cumulative effect of separate national victories, then common functions may remain underbuilt because they lack an immediate national champion. Everyone upgrades domestically; no one invests enough in the regional layer. This creates a region of strong parts and weak connective tissue. Growth advances. Interdependence deepens. But common resilience lags behind.

The relationship between national ambition and regional capability depends on whether the benefits of national success are translated into a more governable regional architecture or simply layered onto a fragmented one. Without that translation, success can increase systemic coordination needs. The region becomes more modern, more connected, and more globally exposed, but not necessarily more capable of acting coherently under stress. This is a central problem for the Gulf. The region's future depends on how much each state builds, as well as on whether what is built can be related, aligned, buffered, and made interoperable across the regional environment. Otherwise, competitive modernization may produce a strategic stack that is rich in assets but still requires stronger collective resilience.

7.5 From Competitive Modernization to Coordinated Resilience

The Gulf should not abandon competition, as it will remain a constitutive feature of the region. It drives ambition, specialization,

institutional experimentation, and global relevance. Gulf competition should be supplemented with coordinated resilience. Coordinated resilience means that states continue to pursue national development but do so with greater attention to the regional consequences of infrastructural concentration, standards divergence, external chokepoints, and shared exposure. The regional challenge is to make the Gulf less brittle as individual states become stronger nodes. This requires several changes in posture. Interoperability must be recognized as a precondition for regional continuity. Some redundancies must be accepted as regionally valuable even when they appear inefficient from a purely national perspective (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Perrow, 1984). The region must also distinguish between infrastructures that remain properly competitive and those that have become too strategically consequential to be left entirely to fragmented design.

The GCC's existing institutional base makes such a shift more plausible than it first appears. The region already has a market-building legacy through the Economic Agreement and customs union, a strategic-security vocabulary through the 2024 Vision for Regional Security, and a growing recognition of shared cyber and continuity needs through the 45th Supreme Council's endorsement of a Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy and information-sharing platform (GCC, 2024; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2004; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). That foundation can now be redirected from market coordination toward resilience across the strategic stack. Coordinated resilience marks the maturation of Gulf geoeconomics. It acknowledges that power in the contemporary Gulf is exercised through sovereign control of territory and national economic growth, but also through the ability to shape and stabilize the systems on which both depend. The task ahead is not to suppress competition, but to ensure that competition is supported by sufficient regional coordination in domains where exposure is already shared.

8. The Politics of Regionalism: Trust, Asymmetry, and the Safeguards Problem

The central political challenge of Gulf regionalism is building trust under asymmetry. The Gulf does not lack common interests. On many major questions, its states share a security environment, overlapping infrastructural dependencies, and exposure to external pressure. The deeper difficulty is political. Regional capability may be strategically desirable while over-concentration of authority remains politically sensitive. The obstacle is building regional functions with safeguards that reassure all member states. This is the safeguards problem. In asymmetric regions, smaller members rarely evaluate regional projects in purely functional terms. They ask how the node will be governed, how the rule will be set, how sensitive information will be protected, how decision rights will be preserved, and whether today's technical coordination will remain within its agreed mandate (Fox, 1959; Lake, 2009; Rothstein, 1968; Tsebelis, 2002; Vital, 1967). These are legitimate design questions. A region may genuinely need shared capability while still needing stronger trust-building mechanisms to build it. Accordingly, the politics of Gulf regionalism run deeper than the language of cooperation. They are shaped by trust, asymmetry, strategic flexibility, and political safeguards. Hierarchy exists, and some degree of asymmetry is an enduring structural fact. The danger is asymmetry without rules and limits, where structural weight becomes unbounded discretion.

8.1 The Rational Need for Safeguards Under Asymmetry

Regional hierarchy is often softened rhetorically rather than analyzed directly. In practice, asymmetry is built into many regional environments. States differ in scale, coercive capacity, demographic weight, economic depth, diplomatic reach, and infrastructural centrality. The Gulf reflects this pattern. Some states inevitably carry more strategic weight than others. It is important how that fact is interpreted politically. For smaller members, asymmetry is rarely interpreted as neutral. It raises the possibility that regional arrangements designed for common function may gradually enable dependence on an over-concentrated center. Shared systems may become systems that create excessive visibility over sensitive information, common standards may be perceived as limiting discretion, and joint operating layers may evolve into unequal leverage in crisis (Fox, 1959; Lake, 2009; Rothstein, 1968; Vital, 1967). Whether or not these outcomes occur, the concern is understandable.

This concern is reinforced by the region's own history of tension and divergence. Recent intra-GCC tensions demonstrated that political divergence was not only theoretical but a real constraint on regional design. The Al-Ula Declaration restored a basis for renewed cohesion, but it did not remove the need for institutions that can preserve cooperation during periods of divergence. History matters because it shapes how states interpret even technically sensible proposals for deeper coordination (Bahrain et al., 2021). The need for safeguards should not be dismissed as excessive caution. It is one of the constitutive facts of regional politics. Where asymmetry exists, it must be governed through clear rules. Where trust cannot be assumed, it must be supported by mechanisms that reduce uncertainty. In the Gulf, that concern is not an obstacle to be dismissed; it is a design requirement (Wendt, 1999).

8.2 Why Smaller Members Seek Strategic Flexibility

Strategic flexibility is often misinterpreted as indecision or lack of commitment. In reality, it is usually a rational strategy adopted under uncertainty when the available options are all risky. Smaller members seek strategic flexibility because they face multiple forms of dependence at once: on larger neighbors for regional capability, on outside powers for security guarantees, on global networks for economic continuity, and on domestic autonomy for regime survival (Fox, 1959; Keohane, 1969; Rothstein, 1968; Vital, 1967; Wendt, 1999). This logic is especially relevant in asymmetric regions. A smaller member may recognize the functional advantages of deeper regional coordination while still worrying that too much dependence on a regional center will reduce future room for maneuver. It may participate enough to gain regional benefits while preserving room for maneuver and fallback options.

Strategic flexibility is not necessarily evidence against regionalism, but rather evidence that the region has not yet offered a politically credible form of it. Smaller members seek strategic flexibility when the regional layer is insufficiently protected against over-centralization and when extra-regional alternatives remain available. Strategic flexibility reveals the absence of confidence that shared interest will be organized fairly. The key lesson is that strategic flexibility cannot be reduced by exhortation alone, but also by institutional forms that make participation safer than abstention.

8.3 The Leadership Paradox and the Limits of Reassuring Leadership

If smaller members seek safeguards, larger members face a different dilemma. In the Gulf, the states with the greatest demographic, military, financial, and diplomatic weight are often expected to underwrite regional capability because they alone can carry higher costs, host larger systems, or sustain regional initiatives over time. Still, the very effort to provide that capability can raise questions about whether regionalism is sufficiently balanced in institutional form. This is the leadership paradox: the strongest state may be too large to ignore, but too large to trust without limits (Lake, 2009; Lindberg, 1963). Reassuring leadership is often presented as the solution. A larger Gulf state leads, contributes more resources, reassures smaller members, and accepts visible limits on discretion. Sometimes this works in limited domains or for limited periods. But as a durable foundation for regional order, it is weak. It depends too heavily on confidence in intentions rather than on structure. Asymmetry in the Gulf is pronounced, and the memory of political divergence remains recent. Smaller members are unlikely to base long-term strategic dependence on assurances alone. The limits of reassuring leadership become clearest when regional functions touch sensitive domains such as intelligence-sharing, defense coordination, strategic infrastructure, payments, data, or crisis response. In these areas, the question for smaller Gulf states is whether support from larger states today could create dependence on them tomorrow. A shared air picture, regional cyber platform, common logistics layer, or jointly governed strategic node may be functionally efficient, but still appear politically risky if one actor becomes too central to visibility, routing, or discretion. The leadership paradox cannot be resolved through reassurance alone. Larger members may genuinely seek stronger regional capability, but that capability will remain politically constrained unless all members can see that influence is bounded by rule. In practice, this means that stronger states may need to accept some procedural restraint for deeper and more durable cooperation: more distributed nodes, clearer mandates, more auditable processes, and stronger protections against institutional imbalance. The challenge is how to convert asymmetry into legitimate leadership rather than politically unsustainable centralization.

8.4 Rule-Based Asymmetry Versus Unbounded Discretion

The previous sections imply a key distinction: asymmetry itself is not the problem. The problem is asymmetry without sufficient rules. Regions rarely consist of perfectly equal actors. Differences in weight, capacity, and contribution are normal. The real political question is whether those differences are bounded by arrangements that make them predictable, limited, and contestable. Rule-based asymmetry accepts that some states will contribute more resources, host more infrastructure, carry more burden, or exercise greater leadership responsibility. But it subjects those realities to visible limits. Mandates are bounded. Rights are protected. Decision rules are known. Core sovereign interests are insulated. Information is auditable. Functions are differentiated. Participation is not equivalent to over-concentration (Hurwicz, 1973; Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

Unbounded discretion is different. It allows structural weight to convert too easily into discretionary control. In such a system, formal cooperation exists, but its terms remain politically contingent on the preferences of the strongest actor. Such arrangements rarely generate deep trust, even when they generate short-term coordination.

This distinction clarifies what kind of regional order is politically viable in the Gulf. The region cannot be built on the fiction of symmetry, nor stabilized by the expectation that concentrated authority will remain permanently self-limiting. What is needed is an architecture that makes asymmetry governable by rule. The GCC's own official language points in this direction by grounding regional order in sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement, and the equality of member states (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC, 2024).

8.5 Trust-building safeguards as the political condition of viable Gulf regionalism

Trust-building safeguards are not optional additions to Gulf regionalism. They are the political condition of its viability. Without credible safeguards against over-concentration, even functionally sensible proposals for regional capability will continue to face hesitation, strategic flexibility, and partial participation. With such safeguards, deeper forms of cooperation become more politically imaginable. Trust-building design requires asymmetry to be bounded, visible, and institutionally governed. It means that shared systems must be designed so that they cannot easily be repurposed into sources of unilateral leverage. In addition, it means that participation must not eliminate protected decision rights over core regime interests. Obligations should be domain-specific rather than general, and reversibility, modularity, and auditability should be built into the architecture itself (Hurwicz, 1973; Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

This has major implications for the future of GCC regionalism. Viable regional arrangements will need to be thinner constitutionally but stronger functionally. They will need to rely less on diffuse promises of solidarity and more on concrete mechanisms that reduce the political cost of participation. They will need to distinguish sharply between shared capability and discretionary control, and to recognize that limited trust is not a temporary deviation from regional cooperation, but part of the environment within which the region must be built. The Gulf is already a real region, and its strategic stack is already shared in effect. But shared exposure alone does not generate viable regionalism. The region's future will depend on whether it can build capability in ways that protect members from over-centralization while strengthening them against external vulnerability.

Part III. Reimagining the Region

9. Beyond Union: A Typology of Regional Forms for the GCC

Before proposing a future architecture for GCC regionalism, one must clarify the range of regional forms actually available. Much debate remains trapped in an unhelpful binary: either the region moves toward something resembling union, or it remains a thin forum of episodic coordination. That binary is analytically limiting and strategically unhelpful. It compresses a wide spectrum of institutional possibilities into two symbolic endpoints.

The Gulf does not face a choice between federation and stagnation. It faces a design problem with multiple possible forms. Some are lighter than union but deeper than consultation; some are technical rather than constitutional, operational rather than declaratory; some preserve national differentiation while building common function (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Hoffmann, 1966; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Söderbaum, 2016).

The GCC's own history already points in this direction. Its Charter established a broad framework of coordination across political, economic, security, legal, and developmental fields. Its Economic Agreement and customs-union framework institutionalized one form of regionalism. Its Joint Defense Agreement, later military-security initiatives, regional security vision, and cybersecurity information-sharing platform institutionalized others (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC, 2024; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2004, 2013; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). The plurality is already there. It now needs to be theorized. This chapter proposes a practical typology of regional forms suited to the Gulf's political and strategic condition. Figure 2 summarizes this spectrum, from coordination to selective pooling, and clarifies the middle institutional space within which the GCC's future is most plausibly located. It ends by making the case for functionally differentiated regionalism as the most plausible form of Gulf regional order.

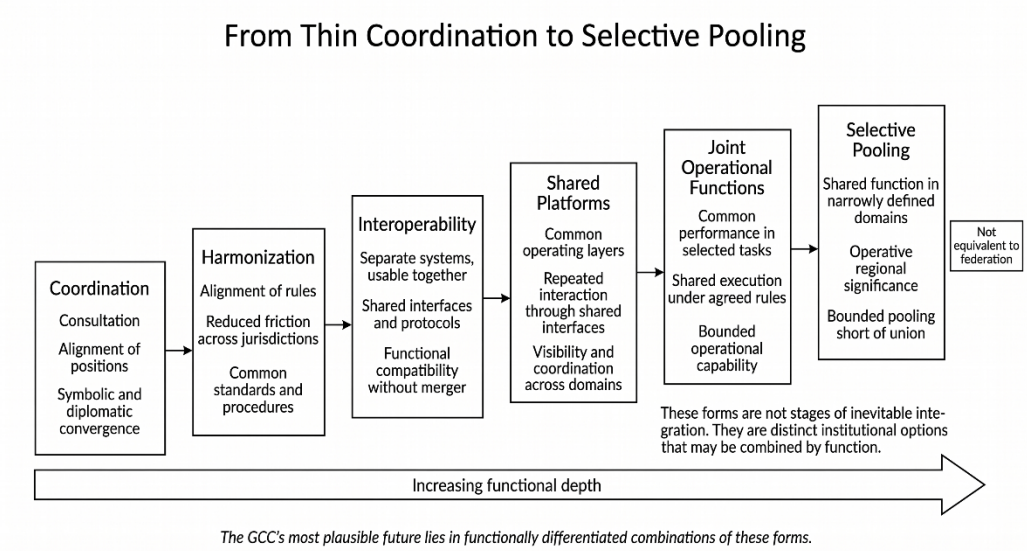

Figure 2. A Typology of Regional Forms for the GCC

9.1 Coordination

Consultative coordination is the lightest and most familiar form of regionalism. It involves consultation, information exchange, diplomatic alignment, shared statements, and the adjustment of national positions in light of common concerns. It does not require common authority or deep institutionalization, which is why it is often the default form of regional cooperation in sovereignty-sensitive environments (Hoffmann, 1966; Mitrany, 1943; Moravcsik, 1998; Olson, 1965). Consultative coordination has real value. It lowers misunderstanding, improves signaling, and allows states to align selectively without committing to deeper integration. In the Gulf, it has often been preferred precisely because it keeps the regional layer politically thin while still allowing symbolic or tactical convergence.

The GCC Charter largely reflects this level in its foundational form. Its language is oriented toward cooperation, coordination, and policy alignment among sovereign member states rather than transfer of authority to a supranational center (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981). Many summit communiqués and ministerial statements operate in the same way: they create diplomatic alignment and common positioning without necessarily creating standing shared capability. But coordination also has clear limits. It is strong on alignment, but less suited to operational functions. It can produce common language without producing common capability, and synchronize statements without synchronizing systems. In domains that depend on shared protocols, reduced latency, compatible standards, or continuity under stress, coordination is necessary but rarely sufficient (Maier, 1998; Olson, 1965; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

9.2 Harmonization

Harmonization is a deeper form. Where coordination aligns positions, harmonization aligns rules, standards, procedures, or regulatory expectations. It is less about common intent than about reducing friction across jurisdictions. Harmonization can occur in customs procedures, technical regulations, licensing, data rules, transport standards, financial supervision, and other domains where regional effectiveness depends on lowering inconsistency (Balassa, 1961; Marks et al., 1996). Harmonization is relevant since many regional problems are not solved by contact alone. They require a degree of common rule environment. Divergent standards can slow movement, raise transaction costs, weaken continuity, or make crisis coordination more difficult. Harmonization addresses these problems by narrowing variation where variation is strategically costly.

In the GCC, the Economic Agreement of 2001 is one of the clearest expressions of this form. It sought convergence across economic, financial, commercial, industrial, and customs fields and provided a basis for deeper economic-policy coordination among member states (GCC Secretariat General, 2001). The Common Customs Law and related unified customs procedures

likewise illustrate harmonization: national administrations remain in place, but their governing rules and procedures become more consistent across jurisdictions (GCC Secretariat General, 2003, 2015). Harmonization is often politically easier than pooling because it does not necessarily require centralized authority. States can align rules while retaining national control over implementation. But it also has limits. Rules can be harmonized on paper while implementation remains uneven, and in highly dynamic domains harmonization may lag behind the speed of change (Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

9.3 Interoperability

Interoperability is more demanding and, for the Gulf, more important. It means that distinct national systems can work together without requiring full institutional merger or uniformity. It is a relational capability rather than a constitutional condition. Systems remain separate, but they can communicate, coordinate, exchange data, and perform together when needed (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Maier, 1998; Simon, 1962). Interoperability is especially useful in sovereignty-sensitive environments. States do not need to surrender all control in order to make their systems compatible. They need shared protocols, interfaces, standards, and procedures that allow those systems to interact reliably. In fast-moving domains, interoperability is often more practical than harmonization because it does not require complete sameness. It requires functional compatibility. Interoperability is especially relevant where the regional problem is operational rather than just regulatory. Maritime awareness, cyber continuity, emergency response, logistics resilience, cross-border digital services, and some dimensions of air and missile defense all depend less on identical institutions than on the ability of distinct institutions to function together under pressure (Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Schelling, 1960).
The GCC's recent emphasis on cybersecurity provides a clear example. The 45th Supreme Council session in 2024 praised the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and the launch of a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among member states, explicitly linking such efforts to the maintenance of the shared Gulf security system (Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). This does not amount to constitutional integration. Its importance lies in making national systems work together more effectively in a domain where fragmentation is costly. For the GCC, interoperability may prove one of the most important regional forms because it allows the region to become strategically denser without requiring political uniformity. It respects pluralism while reducing fragmentation where fragmentation is expensive.

9.4 Shared Platforms

A fourth form is shared platforms. Platforms do not simply connect actors; they organize repeated interaction through a common infrastructure or operating layer. A shared platform may be technical, digital, financial, logistical, informational, or regulatory. Its importance lies in the fact that it creates a common interface through which multiple actors transact, exchange, or coordinate (Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Parker et al., 2016). Platforms matter because they change the structure of regional interaction. Instead of relying only on bilateral exchanges or episodic meetings, actors begin to operate through a common layer. That can generate efficiency, visibility, network effects, and lower coordination costs. But it also raises questions of governance: who runs the platform, who sets the rules, who sees the data, who can exclude, and how power is distributed across the interface (Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Parker et al., 2016; Pollack, 2003). Shared platforms are politically sensitive, especially in asymmetric regions. A platform can become a powerful regional asset, but also a potential instrument of leverage if its governance is insufficiently bounded. So, shared platforms sit near the center of the safeguards problem.

The GCC's recent cybersecurity information-sharing platform is an early and important example of this form (Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). Its significance lies not only in cybersecurity, but in the institutional form itself: a common layer through which information can be exchanged and regional visibility increased without requiring political union. Similar logic may apply in future to logistics dashboards, common data layers, payment interfaces, or regional technical platforms.

9.5 Joint Operational Functions

A fifth form is joint operational function. This is deeper than coordination, harmonization, or platform-sharing because it involves common performance in a specific task or mission area. Participating states do not only align positions or standards. They execute a function together, whether through common centers, fused capabilities, standing procedures, or operational coordination under agreed rules (Deutsch et al., 1957; Walt, 1987). Joint operational functions matter because they mark the

point at which regionalism becomes visible in action rather than only in design. They can exist in domains such as shared maritime picture generation, joint early warning, coordinated cyber incident response, common continuity planning, regional disaster response, or selected defense-support functions. Their virtue is that they produce real capability without necessarily requiring a fully supranational structure.

The GCC's security history offers clear examples. The Joint Defense Agreement signed at the 21st Supreme Council session in 2000 represented a qualitative shift in military cooperation, and the subsequent development of the Peninsula Shield Joint Forces and the 2013 decision to establish a Unified Military Command further pointed toward joint operational logic in selected domains (GCC Secretariat General, 2013). These developments did not create a Gulf federation. They created bounded attempts to perform specific functions together. Because joint functions produce real capability, however, they also intensify political questions. They require clarity on information-sharing, chain of action, responsibility, escalation, and protected domains of national discretion. For the GCC, joint operational functions are likely to be one of the key tests of seriousness. A region that remains at the level of coordination and harmonization alone will struggle to translate common exposure into usable capability.

9.6 Selective Pooling

The deepest form considered in this typology is selective pooling. Pooling means that certain functions are not only coordinated or made interoperable, but jointly organized in ways that give the regional layer genuine operative significance. This does not imply general political union. It means only that, in selected areas, the costs of fragmentation are high enough that shared function must go beyond interface design and become partly collective in structure (Howorth, 2019; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Selective pooling allows a region to scale capability where necessary while preserving differentiation elsewhere. Some functions may remain nationally separate. Some may become interoperable. A smaller set may require actual pooling if they are to be performed credibly at all.

The customs union provides an important GCC example of bounded pooling in the economic domain. A common external tariff, common customs law, and first-point-of-entry procedures require member states to accept some shared structure in a narrowly defined area without implying broader constitutional union (GCC Secretariat General, 2003, 2004, 2015). In security and continuity domains, more limited forms of pooling may be required in future for selected warning, corridor, or redundancy functions where fragmentation remains strategically expensive. This form is politically difficult, which is why it must remain selective. Pooling immediately raises concerns about hierarchy, institutional imbalance, and future mandate expansion. Because of that, it is viable only where the domain is clearly specified, the mandate tightly bounded, the safeguards visible, and the exit or review conditions credible (Hurwicz, 1973; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

9.7 Why the Future GCC Will Not Be a Federation, But Cannot Remain a Forum

The typology allows a more precise conclusion. The future GCC will not be a federation. The political conditions are too different, the sovereignty sensitivities too strong, the internal asymmetries too salient, and the limited trust too deeply embedded for that to remain a plausible horizon of design (Söderbaum, 2016). But the opposite conclusion does not follow. The GCC cannot remain merely a forum either. A forum is sufficient where regionalism is mainly about consultation, symbolism, and periodic alignment. It is not sufficient where the region is already a security and interdependence complex whose strategic stack requires real continuity, real interfaces, and, in some domains, real shared function (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Keohane & Nye, 2012; Maier, 1998).

The GCC's own evolution illustrates the point. The Charter created more than a diplomatic club. The Economic Agreement and customs union moved beyond pure consultation in the economic field. The Joint Defense Agreement, Unified Military Command, and later cybersecurity initiatives moved beyond forum logic in selected strategic fields (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 1981; GCC Secretariat General, 2001, 2004, 2013; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024). These developments are too substantial to be described as mere symbolism, yet too function-specific and politically bounded to be described as proto-federalism. The GCC already inhabits the middle space this chapter is trying to theorize. The real challenge is not choosing between two symbolic endpoints but determining which combination of regional forms best fits the Gulf's strategic condition.

9.8 The case for functionally differentiated regionalism

The proposition is that the GCC's most plausible future is functionally differentiated regionalism. The region should not be organized through one uniform model applied across all domains. It should be organized through a differentiated distribution of regional forms according to the function involved, the cost of fragmentation, the degree of shared exposure, and the political sensitivity of the domain. Functionally differentiated regionalism begins from three premises:

- Not all regional problems are alike. Some require only coordination, some harmonization, some interoperability, some shared platforms, some joint operational function, and a smaller number require selective pooling.
- Asymmetry and limited trust make a one-size-fits-all model politically unstable.
- Effective sovereignty is better protected when functions are arranged at the right scale rather than enclosed in the wrong one (Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008).

This model has several advantages for the Gulf. It avoids the false choice between union and stagnation. It recognizes that the region can become strategically denser without becoming constitutionally uniform. It allows competition to continue in some domains while building common resilience in others. It aligns with the trust-building safeguards principle by limiting deeper regionalization to areas where it is both functionally justified and politically safeguarded.
Functionally differentiated regionalism also matches the logic of the strategic stack. A layered regional environment should not be governed by a single institutional form. Different layers require different arrangements. The maritime layer may require one kind of regionalization, the digital layer another, the regulatory layer another still. The strength of the model lies in that modularity. The broader conclusion is straightforward. The GCC does not need one grand leap into political union. It needs a better map of regional forms and a more disciplined sense of where each belongs. Once that map is available, the future of the region appears neither as a failed federation nor as a permanently shallow forum, but as a differentiated regional architecture built around the strategic functions the Gulf cannot perform well alone.

10. The GCC as a Regional Intelligence System

The GCC should be read as a regional intelligence system. Intelligence here refers to the capacity of a regional order to sense its environment, interpret signals, coordinate response, retain institutional learning, and adapt under changing conditions (Maier, 1998). The Gulf's problem is more than institutional form or diplomatic intent. It is whether a shared strategic environment can be made governable. The region already operates as a layered field of exposure across core strategic domains. What it lacks is a sufficiently developed regional intelligence architecture through which these overlapping exposures can be seen, interpreted, and managed together. The concept does not assume a post-sovereign union or a unitary regional actor. It asks instead which intelligence functions can remain national, which can become interoperable, and which may require bounded regional mechanisms if the region is to remain strategically coherent under stress. Five functions matter most: sensing, processing, coordination, memory, and adaptation. Functionally differentiated regionalism explains where regional cooperation should deepen; the regional intelligence system explains what capabilities that cooperation must perform. The two frameworks operate together. A lightly coordinated domain may require only basic sensing and communication. An interoperable domain may require shared data standards, common operating pictures, and clearer coordination protocols. A selectively pooled domain may require stronger regional memory, adaptation, and decision interfaces. The five intelligence functions are present in all forms of regionalism, but not at the same intensity. Their depth should vary according to the cost of fragmentation, the speed of the threat, and the political sensitivity of the function.

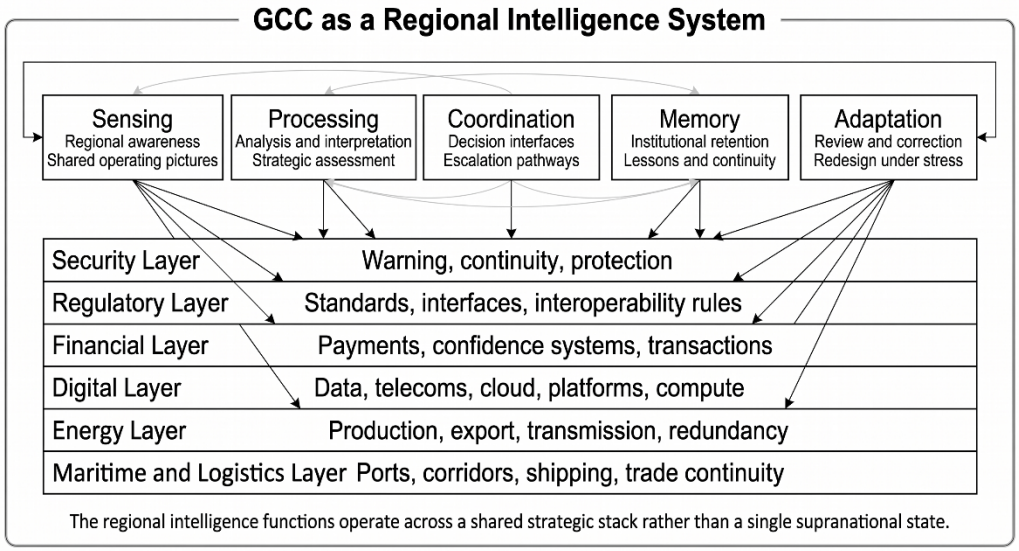

Figure 3. The GCC as a Regional Intelligence System

10.1 Sensing: Regional Awareness and Shared Operating Pictures

Every intelligence system begins with sensing. A political order cannot govern what it cannot see, classify, and monitor in time. At the regional level, however, the environment is shared while the sensors are dispersed. Exposures are regional, while awareness often remains nationally fragmented. This leaves the Gulf with an incomplete operating picture (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998). The Gulf illustrates this clearly. Maritime anomalies, missile trajectories, cyber incidents, infrastructure disruptions, supply-chain disturbances, and shifts in external power posture rarely remain confined in meaning to the state that first detects them. Their regional significance depends on whether they can be seen in a broader picture. Yet sensing in the Gulf has often remained fragmented by sovereignty, institutional compartmentalization, and uneven trust. Consequently, the region faces a shared operating environment without a sufficiently shared operating picture. A shared operating picture requires enough common visibility across selected domains to reduce blind spots, relate events to one another, and produce a more coherent view of regional conditions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Maier, 1998; Walt, 1987).

The political sensitivity of sensing should not be underestimated. Information is strategically sensitive. States worry not only about what is seen, but who sees first, who controls classification, who fuses the data, and whether common awareness might later become leverage. So, regional sensing must be designed with trust-building safeguards. For the GCC, sensing is the first threshold of serious regional capability. Recent GCC practice suggests that this logic is slowly being recognized: the 2024 Vision for Regional Security emphasizes maritime security, freedom of navigation, and missile and drone threats, while the 45th Supreme Council highlighted a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among member states (GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024).

10.2 Processing: Analysis, Interpretation, and Strategic Assessment

Sensing alone does not produce intelligence. Signals must be interpreted, data classified, events situated in context, and meaning extracted from noise. This is the function of processing. At the national level, processing is the work of analysis: fusing inputs, comparing indicators, assessing intent, evaluating consequences, and identifying courses of action. At the regional level, the problem is harder because different states may interpret the same event differently. Threat perceptions, institutional cultures, political sensitivities, and strategic priorities vary. Shared exposure does not automatically produce shared analysis. Common events often arrive through national interpretive filters (Holland, 1995). That makes regional processing one of the most demanding elements of a regional intelligence system. It requires not only information-sharing, but some degree of analytic

translation. States do not need to agree on every interpretation. But if they cannot compare assessments, identify overlap, and clarify divergence in a structured way, regional awareness remains politically thin.

Many of the region's most consequential events are not self-interpreting. A maritime incident may be a local disturbance, a signal, a probe, or a precursor. A cyber disruption may be criminal, political, strategic, or systemic. A technological dependency may look commercial until it becomes coercive. Without structured processing, even strong sensing can produce weak regional judgment. The GCC does not need a single regional mind, but rather standing analytic interfaces through which assessments can be compared, fused where appropriate, and related to common strategic questions. Processing in this sense is not the abolition of national judgment. Instead, it is the creation of a regional layer of analytic capacity that allows national judgments to be situated within a wider pattern.

10.3 Coordination: Protocols, Escalation Paths, and Decision Interfaces

The third function of a regional intelligence system is coordination. If sensing gives visibility and processing gives interpretation, coordination converts intelligence into organized response. It asks how decisions move, who is notified, which channels activate, what protocols apply, how escalation is sequenced, and where the interfaces between national and regional action are located (Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Schelling, 1960). Coordination differs from consultation. Consultation allows actors to exchange views.1 Coordination requires predefined relationships between information, decision, and action. Without protocols and interfaces, awareness and analysis often dissipate into delay.

This is especially acute in the Gulf because regional problems often unfold faster than traditional diplomatic rhythms can accommodate. Maritime events may escalate into logistical disruption. Cyber incidents may affect civilian continuity before political consultation catches up. Missile warning or infrastructure disruption may require immediate technical coordination even before full political alignment exists. A regional intelligence system requires escalation paths, contact ladders, decision thresholds, and bounded protocols through which selected forms of coordinated action can occur. These should not imply generalized regional command. But without them, the region remains trapped between shared exposure and fragmented response. The political sensitivity of coordination is obvious. Protocols can create concerns about hierarchy, interfaces can create concerns about dependency, and escalation paths can raise questions about who sits at the center. For that reason, coordination design must remain consistent with the trust-building safeguards principle. GCC practice offers suggestive examples: the continued completion of the requirements of the Unified Military Command and its affiliated units and centers, noted by the Ministerial Council in 2023, and the appointment of a Commander of the Unified Military Command endorsed by the Supreme Council in 2024 both indicate movement toward more structured regional coordination in selected security functions (Statement issued by the 155th session of the GCC Ministerial Council, 2023; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024).

10.4 Memory: Institutional Retention, Lessons, and Strategic Continuity

The fourth function of a regional intelligence system is memory. Political systems do not become intelligent just by responding to events. They become intelligent by retaining lessons, preserving institutional knowledge, and carrying strategic continuity across cycles of crisis, personnel change, and political fluctuation (Maier, 1998). Memory is less visible than treaties or operations, but it is decisive. Regions that repeatedly confront similar disruptions but fail to retain what they learn remain trapped in episodic adaptation. They rediscover the same weaknesses, repeat the same delays, and rebuild the same partial fixes. This problem is especially acute where cooperation is intermittent or politically sensitive. If common lessons are not institutionally retained, each disruption begins too close to scratch. Trust must be renegotiated, information channels reassembled, and analytic frames reconstructed.

For the Gulf, memory means retaining lessons from regional stress, preserving continuity across leadership and bureaucratic transitions, and building archives, procedures, and analytic baselines that place regional problems within longer patterns of stress and response. Episodes of intra-GCC divergence and subsequent reconciliation at Al-Ula, repeated maritime-security stresses, and the region's evolving cyber agenda all underscore the need for retained regional lessons rather than repeated

1 This use of coordination is different from consultative coordination as a regional form: here it refers to the intelligence function that links information, decision rights, escalation pathways, and action.

institutional reset. A regional intelligence system requires some mechanism of institutional retention. This can avoid the form of a thick centralized bureaucracy while still requiring standing repositories of lessons, structured review processes, and continuity of strategic understanding across events.

10.5 Adaptation: Revision, Correction, and Resilience Under Stress

The fifth function is adaptation. If memory preserves lessons, adaptation applies them under changing conditions. It is the capacity to revise assumptions, adjust design, and correct error when the environment shifts or the system fails (Holland, 1995; Perrow, 1984). Adaptation is especially important in the Gulf because the region's operating environment is not static. Threat vectors evolve. Technologies change. Infrastructures become denser and more layered. Dependencies move into new domains. Extra-regional actors alter their posture. Internal competition reshapes the regional stack. Adaptation is also a test of whether the region treats failure intelligently. In brittle systems, failure is denied, hidden, or translated into ceremonial reaffirmation. In adaptive systems, failure becomes information. It triggers review, redesign, and selective institutional correction.

At the regional level, adaptation requires some capacity for cross-border error-correction. This might involve after-action review, joint evaluation of incidents, revision of protocols, updating of interfaces, or redesign of redundancy arrangements. The precise form may vary by domain. The principle is constant: a region becomes more capable when it can alter its operating architecture in light of what it has learned. This function links directly to resilience. Resilience means withstanding disruption while learning and redesigning. Recent GCC initiatives—a regional-security vision in 2024, a cybersecurity strategy for 2024–2028, and a regional cybersecurity information-sharing platform—suggest attempts to adjust regional architecture to newer domains of vulnerability (GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024).

10.6 From National Intelligence Functions to Regional Intelligence Functions

The preceding sections allow a final step. The five intelligence functions identified here are often associated with national systems. But under conditions of dense regional interdependence, parts of those functions begin to acquire a regional dimension. This does not mean the region replaces the state. It means that some intelligence functions must be layered across scales if the state itself is to remain effective. That translation must be approached carefully. Not every intelligence function belongs at the regional level. Some remain properly national because they concern regime protection, internal authority, or domains where political sensitivity makes pooling counterproductive. Others, however, are already regional in effect even if not yet regional in design. Shared maritime awareness, selected warning functions, corridor continuity, cross-border cyber situational understanding, infrastructure risk mapping, common dashboards, and after-action learning are examples of areas where the region's need for intelligence exceeds what nationally isolated architectures can reliably provide (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Walt, 1987).

The concept of a regional intelligence system is useful for this reason. It offers a way to imagine Gulf regionalism through the selective regionalization of intelligence functions where shared exposure has already outgrown the national scale. It fits the logic of differentiated sovereignty because it allows functions to be distributed rather than uniformly transferred. And it fits the safeguards requirement because it allows design around bounded mandates, domain specificity, distributed nodes, and protected decision rights. The GCC should not become a single intelligence authority. What it needs is a layered intelligence architecture that improves the region's ability to see, interpret, coordinate, remember, and adapt in domains where fragmentation has become strategically costly.

Intelligence function	What stronger performance would look like
Sensing	Shared or interoperable operating pictures in selected domains; reduced latency in incident visibility; agreed reporting formats; wider common visibility across maritime, cyber, infrastructure, or logistics layers
Processing	Standing analytic interfaces; routine comparison of national assessments; structured regional review formats; shared classification of major incidents or cross-border disruptions
Coordination	Pre-agreed notification rules; escalation ladders; domain-specific response protocols; clearer interfaces between technical and political levels; bounded but repeatable joint action pathways
Memory	Institutionalized after-action review; retained lessons and archived procedures; recurring strategic review cycles; continuity of regional analytic understanding across crises and leadership changes
Adaptation	Formal protocol revision after incidents; redesign of interfaces or standards in light of failure; periodic updating of continuity assumptions; visible correction of architectural weaknesses over time

Table 1: Indicative markers of regional intelligence capacity

These indicators also clarify the status of the framework developed in this paper. The five functions are not only interpretive categories. They are also practical criteria for judging whether regionalism is becoming more capable in the domains where the Gulf's shared strategic environment already exceeds nationally isolated architectures.

Part IV. Designing GCC 2030

11. Functional Domains for GCC 2030

GCC 2030 should not be designed as a single undifferentiated institutional project. It should be built across domains in which shared exposure is already high, the costs of fragmentation are already visible, and the value of selective regional capability is greatest. These domains do not all require the same form of regionalism. Some call for interoperability, some for shared platforms, some for joint operational functions, and some for selective pooling. Together, however, they define the functional core of GCC 2030. They are united by their place inside the Gulf's shared strategic stack. They concern the systems through which the region sees, moves, protects continuity, absorbs shocks, and maintains sovereignty under pressure. Calling them sectors understates their role. They are layers of regional capability. Together, these eight domains form the functional core of GCC 2030 and show where the region's architecture must become functionally denser.

11.1 Air and Missile Defense

Air and missile defense is one of the clearest domains in which fragmentation imposes immediate regional costs. Missile and drone threats compress time, complicate attribution, and place a premium on shared sensing, early warning, and coordinated response. In such an environment, nationally segmented architectures preserve jurisdiction but may reduce effectiveness. The geometry of threat is regional even where responsibility remains national (Walt, 1987). For the Gulf, this does not necessarily imply a fully unified command structure. It does imply that warning, tracking, common air pictures, and selected coordination protocols should increasingly be treated as regional functions. Fragmented visibility creates blind spots, fragmented response logic increases latency, and fragmented planning weakens deterrent credibility.

The appropriate form here is layered. At the lighter end, interoperable sensing and shared operating pictures are essential. At the deeper end, selected joint operational functions may be required for warning and coordinated defensive continuity. The key point is that air and missile defense should not be imagined solely as a set of nationally bounded military assets. It is a regional, time-sensitive function whose effectiveness depends on the density of the intelligence and response architecture built around it.

This domain is already visible in GCC strategic language and practice. The GCC Vision for Regional Security calls for intensified action with regional and international partners to prevent access by non-state actors to ballistic missile technology and drone systems, while the Supreme Council in 2024 endorsed the appointment of the Commander of the Unified Military Command. These steps do not amount to a unified Gulf air-defense architecture, but they do show recognition that missile- and drone-related threats exceed a purely national frame.

11.2 Maritime Domain Awareness and Corridor Security

Few domains make the regional condition of the Gulf more visible than the maritime one. The region's economic life, strategic relevance, and external exposure all run through sea lanes, ports, chokepoints, and maritime corridors. Maritime insecurity is never only local. It affects shipping continuity, insurance costs, energy credibility, logistics resilience, food access, strategic signaling, and the perception of regional stability more broadly (Cowen, 2014; Sandler, 2006). This makes maritime domain awareness a natural core of future GCC regional capability. No single state can fully secure the regional maritime picture through nationally bounded visibility alone. Vessel movements, anomalies, infrastructure risks, corridor disruptions, and escalatory incidents acquire meaning only when seen in a wider operating context. So, the region needs stronger common layers of sensing, monitoring, interpretation, and continuity planning.

Corridor security should also be approached as a regional public good. Corridor security includes physical protection, but its deeper function is preserving continuity of movement across a system on which the region's strategic and economic viability depends. That requires more than naval presence. It requires data fusion, port coordination, logistical awareness, incident protocols, and structured pathways between sensing and political response. For GCC 2030, this domain is especially suitable for region-building because it combines strategic urgency with relatively clear functional logic. The GCC Vision for Regional Security explicitly identifies maritime security and freedom of navigation as strategic objectives and calls for stronger coordination to protect navigation lanes, trade, and energy supplies. Maritime awareness is one of the clearest officially acknowledged candidates for denser regional capability.

11.3 Cybersecurity and Digital Continuity

Cybersecurity is often described as a national technical function. In practice, cyber risk in the Gulf increasingly sits within a wider regional continuity problem. Telecom systems, cloud dependencies, vendor architectures, software supply chains, platform concentration, and cross-border service integration all create pathways through which disruption travels beyond the jurisdiction in which it first appears (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Perrow, 1984). Cybersecurity should not be treated only as defense against intrusion. It should be treated as part of digital continuity: the capacity to preserve operational function across public and private systems under conditions of disruption, attack, or failure. This is inherently regional where infrastructures, dependencies, and service layers overlap. The key issue is how disruption propagates.

A GCC 2030 approach should move beyond isolated cyber postures toward selected regional functions such as shared situational awareness, common incident taxonomies, continuity coordination, cross-border response interfaces, and structured review of major disruptions. Not all cyber functions should be regionalized; many are rightly national. But a region that shares digital dependencies cannot rely only on fragmented arrangements to understand and absorb cyber events. This is one of the clearest emerging domains in official GCC practice. The regional security vision calls for raising cybersecurity levels and countering cybercrime through joint action plans and partnerships, while the 45th Supreme Council praised the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and the launch of a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among member states. Those developments make cybersecurity one of the most immediate candidates for a genuinely regional intelligence function.

11.4 Cloud, Data, and Strategic Compute Governance

Cloud, data, and compute are increasingly foundational to both state function and future power. They are often approached through the language of innovation, digital transformation, or industrial policy. In the Gulf, they must also be classified as strategic domains because they shape dependence, continuity, AI capability, information concentration, and the practical location of sovereign digital capacity (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Hurwicz, 1973; Parker et al., 2016). Cloud infrastructure shapes where critical functions run, who controls access layers, how resilient public and private systems are, and whether continuity can be preserved under stress. Data governance shapes visibility, control, auditability, and the conditions under which regional

systems become interoperable or remain fragmented. Strategic compute is increasingly tied to AI capability, technological dependence, and future control over higher-order digital functions.

For GCC 2030, the key challenge is whether the region can avoid deep dependence, incompatible standards, and brittle concentrations while each state builds its own digital future. This suggests selective regional coordination in areas such as resilience standards, continuity architecture, common principles for critical data and cloud dependency, and possibly shared approaches to compute governance where external chokepoints are acute. Official GCC texts do not yet provide a fully articulated regional framework for cloud or compute governance. But the growing emphasis on cybersecurity, digital transformation of joint security services, and information-sharing platforms indicates that the digital layer is already moving from a purely national modernization issue toward a shared regional continuity issue.

11.5 Energy Infrastructure and Regional Redundancy

Energy has long been the material foundation of the Gulf's global significance. But in the Gulf, energy is also a regional problem of shared infrastructure, continuity expectations, route vulnerability, and redundancy under stress. Energy infrastructure becomes regionally significant when disruption to one node affects the credibility, resilience, or strategic perception of the wider system. Export routes, processing systems, concentrated infrastructure, and shared expectations of reliability all generate forms of common exposure. Energy security in the Gulf is not purely national even when assets are nationally owned. Its strategic meaning is regional in effect.

Each state will continue to protect its own energy infrastructure. The future-oriented question is how the region builds redundancy, continuity logic, and cross-border resilience around that national effort. A regional approach can help identify where backup capacity, rerouting logic, mutual support arrangements, or common continuity standards are needed to prevent disruption in one part of the system from cascading more widely (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Perrow, 1984; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). The GCC Vision for Regional Security explicitly links regional security to the stability of energy supplies and oil markets and to the defense of vital economic resources. This shifts energy from being treated only as a national wealth asset toward being treated as a shared resilience layer in the regional strategic system.

11.6 Trade, Logistics, and Supply-Chain Resilience

Trade and logistics remain central to Gulf regionalism, but their meaning has changed. They are not only about efficiency and commercial throughput. They are also about resilience, corridor continuity, concentration risk, and the strategic durability of the region's role in global flows (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Cowen, 2014; Keohane, 1969). Supply chains show especially clearly why the region must move from market logic alone to strategic-stack thinking. A supply chain is not simply a commercial arrangement. It is a layered system of dependencies, infrastructures, timing, routing, and standards. When such systems are regionally dense, nationally isolated planning can create regional blind spots. States may optimize separately while the system as a whole becomes more brittle.

A GCC 2030 design should treat trade and logistics as resilience domains. This means greater attention to cross-border visibility, redundancy, corridor planning, crisis routing, port-logistics interoperability, and shared understanding of where critical supply vulnerabilities sit. Not every logistics function needs regionalization. But the region's continuity under stress will increasingly depend on whether logistics and supply chains are seen as part of the common operating environment rather than as purely national commercial success stories. This domain also rests on an existing GCC foundation. The Economic Agreement, customs union, and Common Customs Law already created a regional framework for movement and single-point-of-entry customs logic. GCC 2030 should build on that base, but reinterpret it through continuity and resilience rather than throughput alone.

11.7 Standards, Interoperability, and Regulatory Coordination

No strategic stack functions coherently without standards and interfaces. Standards, interoperability, and regulatory coordination are not minor technical matters. They are among the most important enabling layers of GCC 2030. Standards determine whether systems can connect. Interoperability determines whether different national architectures can function together under real conditions. Regulatory coordination determines whether legal and institutional

environments create unnecessary friction, opacity, or incompatibility (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). These functions may appear less dramatic than defense or crisis response, but they are often decisive.

This domain is particularly important for the Gulf because it offers one of the most politically feasible paths toward deeper regionalism. Standards and interoperability can often be improved without triggering the same level of sovereignty anxiety as broader pooling. Yet their practical effects can be profound. They reduce friction, allow selective system compatibility, enable shared platforms, and create the conditions under which other regional forms become possible. The GCC's institutional record strongly supports this view. The Economic Agreement, customs union, and Common Customs Law are all examples of regionalism working through rules, standards, and interface design rather than through constitutional union. That is precisely why this domain should be treated as one of the most realistic building blocks of GCC 2030.

11.8 Space, Satellite Support, and Orbital Regional Capabilities

Space has often entered Gulf strategic thinking through prestige, national ambition, or technological modernization. As the region's strategic environment becomes more layered, however, space must also be considered as a regional capability domain. Satellites, remote sensing, communications support, timing, navigation augmentation, environmental monitoring, and orbital awareness increasingly affect how the region sees, communicates, and preserves continuity. Orbital infrastructures are becoming part of the wider strategic environment through which regional awareness, resilience, and operational continuity are organized (Ashby, 1956; Peoples & Stevens, 2020; Pekkanen, 2019). Space is one of the clearest dual-use layers in the contemporary strategic stack. Civilian and strategic functions overlap. Remote sensing may support agriculture, infrastructure planning, disaster response, and security monitoring at once. Communications resilience may matter for both economic continuity and crisis response. Space is increasingly a dual-use enabling layer whose disruption or governance can have broad terrestrial consequences (Pekkanen, 2019; Peoples & Stevens, 2020). For GCC 2030, this makes space a candidate area for selective regional capability, including satellite support, shared data products, interoperable standards, and regional thinking about orbital resilience. This does not require a single Gulf space authority. It points instead to satellite support, shared data products, common service layers, interoperable standards, and regional thinking about orbital resilience. Even older GCC documentation hints at this logic. "GCC: The Process and Achievements" notes joint-security uses of satellite communications as an alternate means for broadcasting important data in cases of interruption and refers to GCC coordination around satellite-related communications issues. These references suggest that orbital and satellite support have already appeared in GCC practice as continuity and interconnection tools rather than just prestige technologies.

12. Institutional Design: Building a Regional Architecture That Can Be Trusted

The future of Gulf regionalism depends less on building larger institutions than on building more trusted ones. In a region marked by asymmetry, strategic flexibility, and rational concerns about over-centralization, institutional design is the political core of the project. States are unlikely to enter denser regional arrangements simply because the functional case is strong. They will do so only if the architecture visibly reduces the risk that shared capability becomes a pathway to internal hierarchy. This is consistent with institutional-design work that treats governance as a problem of rules, incentives, monitoring, trust, and institutional diversity rather than a choice between centralization and fragmentation (Ostrom, 2005). The chapter argues for a specific design philosophy: thin institutions, strong functions. Institutional minimalism is not the point. Thicker regional structures can generate political anxiety before they generate enough practical value to overcome it. The Gulf's likely path is the reverse. Institutions must remain constitutionally thin where political sensitivity is high, while functions become operationally stronger where shared exposure already demands regional capability. That implies a different image of regional order. It is not over-concentration, one unified chain of authority, or one seamless regional bureaucracy. It is a distributed, bounded, modular, auditable architecture designed to make cooperation usable under conditions of limited trust.

The institutional problem of Gulf regionalism is not how to embody idealized unity. It is how to engineer credible restraint while still generating real capability (Hurwicz, 1973; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002; Ostrom, 2005). Figure 4 summarizes these design principles as the institutional logic of a trusted GCC regional architecture: thin in constitutional form, strong in function, distributed in structure, and bounded by trust-building safeguards. The GCC's own constitutional grammar already points in this direction. The Charter created a system built around the Supreme Council, the Ministerial Council, and the Secretariat General, while also allowing sub-agencies as necessary. That is already a thin constitutional structure with room for differentiated functional layering rather than one expansive supranational center.

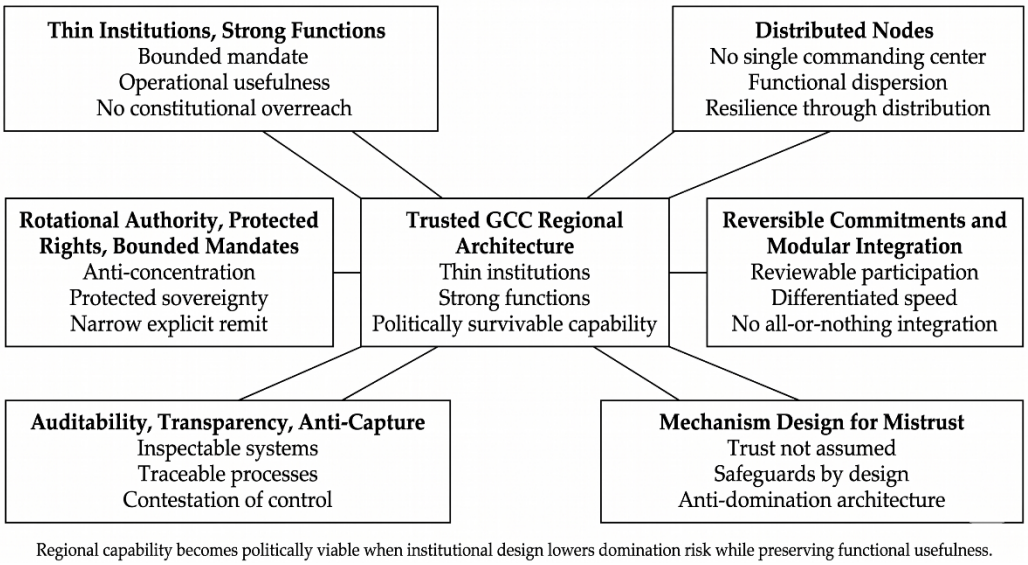

Figure 4. Institutional Design Principles for a Trusted GCC Regional Architecture.

12.1 Thin Institutions, Strong Functions

The first design principle is that regional institutions in the Gulf should remain thin in constitutional form while becoming stronger in functional performance. Where limited trust and asymmetry are durable, institutional thickness may trigger suspicion before it generates confidence. The design task is to minimize constitutional overreach while maximizing functional usefulness. A thin institution can still be operationally meaningful. It is an institution with a bounded mandate, limited constitutional ambition, and clearly specified functional scope. Its legitimacy does not rest on claims to represent a higher political unity. It rests on its ability to perform a defined task well. The Gulf does not need institutions that symbolize transcendence of sovereignty. It needs institutions that solve problems at the right scale without threatening regime-level autonomy (Marks et al., 1996; Pollack, 2003; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Strong functions, by contrast, mean that the regional layer should be assessed by what it can actually do: support common awareness, reduce latency, preserve continuity under stress, and improve interoperability, redundancy, or strategic resilience. Functional strength is not about organizational grandeur. It is about operational usefulness. In a Gulf context, the strongest regional institution may be one that remains politically modest but strategically indispensable. The GCC's recent cyber agenda offers a useful illustration. A regional cybersecurity strategy and an information-sharing platform are functionally significant measures, yet they do not require a thick new constitutional layer. For GCC 2030, the implication is simple: define the function first, then build only the minimum institutional form necessary to carry it.

12.2 Distributed Nodes, Not Over-Concentration

The second design principle is distribution. In regions marked by asymmetry, a single over-concentrated center is often politically sensitive. Even if such a center promises efficiency, it is likely to intensify smaller-state concerns about over-concentration, excessive visibility over sensitive information, or future discretionary control. In many strategic domains, whoever controls the center may gain structural leverage through information, timing, classification, or interface authority (Lake, 2009; Tsebelis, 2002; Vital, 1967). For that reason, the GCC's future architecture should be built around distributed nodes rather than one over-concentrated hub of command. Distribution does not mean disorganization. It means that critical functions are allocated across different nodes so that no single center becomes the unquestioned gateway through which all strategic function must pass. Some may specialize in awareness, others in continuity, standards, review, redundancy, or domain-specific coordination.

This is especially important in intelligence-like regional functions. Shared operating pictures, incident reporting, continuity planning, technical coordination, and data layers all raise questions about who sits at the center of visibility. A distributed-node architecture helps mitigate those concerns by making the region's intelligence system less susceptible to institutional imbalance. It also strengthens resilience, since distributed systems are often better able to absorb disruption than those reliant on a single concentration point (Maier, 1998; Perrow, 1984). The Charter's basic institutional structure is compatible with this

logic. It does not create a single all-powerful regional executive. Instead, it separates authority across the Supreme Council, the Ministerial Council, the Secretariat General, and such sub-agencies as may be established.

12.3 Rotational Authority, Protected Rights, and Bounded Mandates

A third principle is that regional authority must remain visibly limited. This requires three linked elements: rotational authority, protected rights, and bounded mandates. Rotational authority matters because it prevents certain regional functions from becoming permanently identified with one national center. Not every function can rotate, and not every function should. But where rotation is feasible (particularly in convening roles, review functions, agenda-setting, oversight, and selected coordinating responsibilities) it can reduce the sense that regional institutions are simply extensions of the strongest actor's strategic posture (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002). The GCC already has a constitutional precedent for this principle. The Charter provides that the presidency of the Supreme Council rotates alphabetically among member states, while the Ministerial Council presidency follows the state that presided over the last ordinary session of the Supreme Council or the next state in line. In design terms, that is an anti-concentration device embedded in the organization's basic law. Protected rights are equally important. Smaller states will not enter denser regional arrangements unless they retain confidence that participation does not erase their veto over core sovereign interests. This does not mean every issue should be subject to absolute veto. It means that certain domains (especially those touching regime security, internal political autonomy, or existential decisions) must remain clearly insulated from regional overreach. The GCC Charter again offers a useful reference point. Each member of the Supreme Council has one vote, substantive resolutions require unanimous approval of the participating member states, and only procedural matters are decided by majority vote. Bounded mandates complete the triad: regional bodies and mechanisms should be given narrow, explicit purposes rather than open-ended authority. In the Gulf, regional mandates must remain clearly bounded.

12.4 Reversible Commitments and Modular Integration

The fourth principle is reversibility and modularity. Regional arrangements are more politically viable when states know that participation is not an irreversible constitutional surrender. Under Gulf political conditions, all-or-nothing integration is rarely credible. States need pathways of entry, review, adjustment, and, if necessary, exit (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Wiener, 1948). Reversible commitments matter because they reduce concerns about entrapment. A state is more likely to enter a denser arrangement if it knows that the commitment is bounded, reviewable, and not automatically permanent regardless of performance or political change. Reversibility also disciplines the regional layer, because a mechanism must remain useful enough to justify continued buy-in. Modular integration adds a second advantage. It allows different domains to evolve at different speeds and depths. Not all functions need the same architecture, and not all member states may be equally ready for every form of regionalization. Modularity prevents the region from being trapped by the expectation that all members must move together at the same depth across all sectors. The GCC's own institutional record already displays elements of this logic. Economic integration, customs coordination, military cooperation, cybersecurity initiatives, and information-sharing platforms have not all developed through one uniform mechanism or at one uniform pace. That is not just a sign of incompleteness. It is evidence that modular development is already a practical feature of Gulf regionalism.

12.5 Auditability, Transparency, and Balanced Governance

A fifth principle is auditability. In asymmetric regions, limited trust often grows not only from formal authority, but from opacity. States worry about what they cannot inspect. They worry that data flows, technical systems, standards-setting processes, or operational platforms may be quietly shaped in ways that create future leverage. Regional architectures must be auditable: participants must be able to see how the system works, what decisions are being made, who has access, and whether the rules are being followed (Hurwicz, 1973; Pollack, 2003; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002). Transparency in this context does not mean that all information becomes fully public. It means that the internal workings of regional mechanisms are sufficiently inspectable to those inside them. Processes must be traceable, data governance legible, access arrangements reviewable, and technical standards not hidden inside opaque centers of control. This connects directly to balanced governance. Institutional imbalance can occur not only through overt political over-centralization, but through quieter forms of structural control: control of information gateways, agenda-setting monopolies, data asymmetries, hidden technical dependencies, or one-sided influence over shared systems. Preventing this requires more than balanced representation. It requires institutional design that diffuses control, creates review mechanisms, and preserves the ability of participants to contest how the system operates. The Charter's provision for an ad hoc Commission for the Settlement of Disputes is useful here as an institutional clue. It suggests a preference for bounded, case-specific mechanisms rather than permanently empowered quasi-judicial bodies. That design instinct fits the broader logic of auditability and balanced governance more than open-ended delegation would.

12.6 Ethics, Governance, and Safeguards

Any proposal to build regional intelligence functions across cyber, data, logistics, infrastructure, or security domains raises obvious governance risks. Shared sensing can create excessive visibility over sensitive information. Shared platforms can create concerns about quiet hierarchy. Data-sharing can exceed its functional purpose and drift into uses beyond the agreed mandate. The question is how regional capability should be built and under what safeguards it remains legitimate. A GCC architecture consistent with the trust-building safeguards principle should rest on four governance rules. First, data minimization and purpose limitation: regional information-sharing should collect only what is necessary for the bounded function at hand and should not be repurposed beyond that mandate. Second, oversight and contestability: member states should retain the ability to inspect, question, and challenge how shared systems operate, what data they process, and whether the original mandate is being exceeded. Third, auditability and traceability: access rules, classification procedures, and decision logs should be sufficiently transparent within the system to prevent hidden concentration of control. Fourth, reversibility: where shared mechanisms are misused, expanded beyond mandate, or rendered inconsistent with agreed safeguards, member states must retain clearly defined procedures for suspension, review, or withdrawal (Hurwicz, 1973; Pollack, 2003; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002). These safeguards are not ethical decorations added after institutional design. They are part of the design itself. In the Gulf, regional capability becomes politically viable only if visibility, coordination, and shared function are governed by strict limits. Therefore, a trusted regional architecture must be effective, inspectable, contestable, and bounded in purpose (Fox, 1959; Keohane, 1969; Lake, 2009; Vital, 1967).

12.7 Mechanism Design for Limited Trust, Not Idealized Unity

The correct institutional philosophy for Gulf regionalism is not design for idealized unity. It is mechanism design for limited trust. It rejects a recurring mistake in regional thought: the assumption that shared identity, goodwill, or common interest make design secondary. In the Gulf, architecture cannot be treated as administrative refinement added after politics. It is the means through which cooperation becomes credible under conditions already shaped by limited trust and asymmetry (Fox, 1959; Lake, 2009; Rothstein, 1968; Tsebelis, 2002; Vital, 1967). Mechanism design for limited trust begins from a harder realism. It assumes that states may need the same capability while seeking safeguards around one another's power. It assumes that common exposure does not eliminate strategic flexibility. It assumes that asymmetry creates real political anxiety. And it asks what rules, structures, protocols, and safeguards make cooperation possible even when trust remains partial (Hurwicz, 1973; Vital, 1967). Hence, the institutional principles set out above are not decorative additions. Thin institutions, distributed nodes, rotational authority, protected rights, bounded mandates, reversibility, modularity, auditability, and balanced governance are all mechanisms through which limited trust is made governable. Their purpose is not to create post-political harmony. It is to lower the risk that participation later becomes dependence without safeguards. The GCC's existing constitutional order already contains some building blocks for this approach: rotating presidencies, unanimity in substantive Supreme Council matters, quarterly Ministerial Council meetings, ad hoc dispute-settlement design, and bounded sub-agency creation. These are not sufficient in themselves. But they show that Gulf regionalism is not institutionally blank. The more serious design challenge is to extend this logic into new functional domains like cyber, continuity, warning, logistics, and shared platforms, without abandoning the trust-building safeguards already embedded in the system.

13. Decision Architecture for Regional Statecraft

Regional architecture may be politically acceptable in principle yet still remain strategically weak if it cannot convert awareness into decision, and decision into timely response. Many regional projects stall here. They establish forums, build committees, and create procedural space for consultation, but do not always specify how action is meant to move through the system. The region can deliberate, but it cannot reliably act under pressure. The GCC should avoid that outcome if it hopes to become a serious strategic system by 2030. The region's key exposures of maritime disruption, missile warning, cyber incidents, infrastructure failure, corridor interruption, and cross-domain escalation, do not wait for summit cycles. They unfold at different paces and often require action faster than ordinary diplomatic coordination can sustain. Future Gulf regionalism must function as both an institutional arrangement and a decision architecture.

Decision architecture refers to the structured pathways through which information is elevated, assessed, routed, authorized, and translated into action. It concerns who decides, at what level, under what trigger conditions, using which interfaces, and with what degree of discretion or constraint (Hurwicz, 1973; Maier, 1998; Pollack, 2003; Schelling, 1960). It is what distinguishes a region that can consult from one that can act. The GCC's own constitutional framework already contains the outline of a layered decision system. The Charter gives the Supreme Council responsibility for higher policy and major decisions, the Ministerial Council responsibility for proposals, recommendations, coordination, and preparation of Supreme Council meetings, and the Secretariat General responsibility for studies, reporting, and follow-up on implementation. This

basic architecture needs to be translated into faster and more function-specific operating pathways suited to the strategic environment the Gulf now inhabits. Figure 5 summarizes that logic as an end-to-end regional decision architecture, from sensing and assessment to escalation, coordination, action, memory, and adaptation.

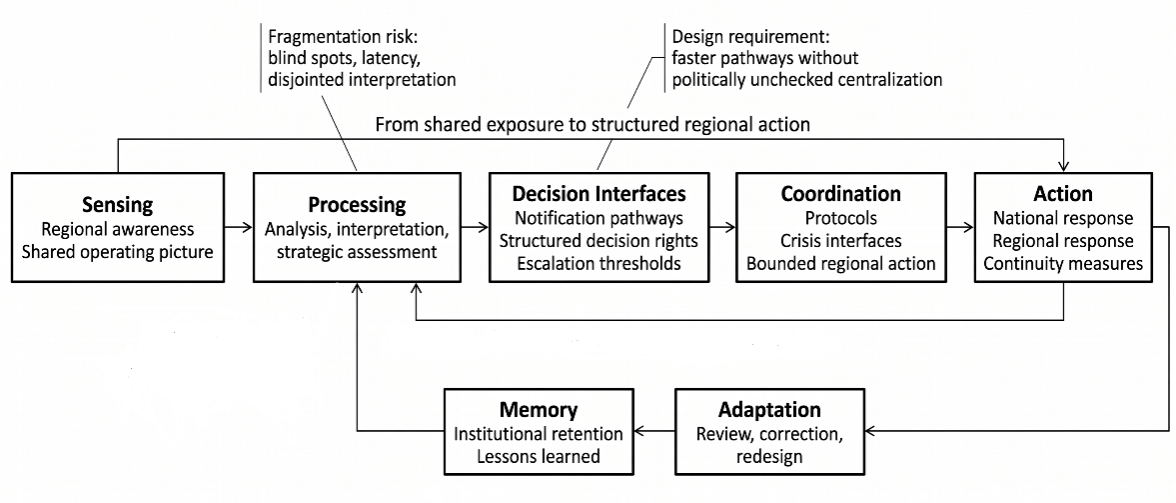

Figure 5: End-to-End Regional Decision Architecture: From Sensing to Action

13.1 From Summit Diplomacy to Operating Systems

Regional politics in the Gulf has long been shaped by summit diplomacy. High-level meetings, declarations, and elite coordination have been the visible grammar of regional life. These practices matter. They confer legitimacy, provide direction, and preserve political control over sensitive matters. But they are insufficient as the main operating model for a region whose strategic environment has become faster, denser, and more system-dependent. Summit diplomacy is episodic by nature. It works well for signaling, broad alignment, and political settlement at critical moments. It is much less suited to the continuous management of cross-domain interdependence. When regional order depends on warning, continuity, interoperability, escalation management, and infrastructure resilience, the central question is how the region functions between summits more than what leaders agree in principle during summits (Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Schelling, 1960). Thus, the GCC must move toward operating systems. An operating system, in this context, is a structured set of routines, interfaces, escalation ladders, review mechanisms, and decision pathways that allow the region to function continuously rather than ceremonially. It enables selected domains to be managed through standing arrangements rather than ad hoc improvisation each time stress appears. The Charter itself reveals the limits of relying on summit diplomacy alone. The Supreme Council meets in one regular session each year, while the Ministerial Council convenes every three months. That structure is appropriate for high politics and periodic review. It is not, by itself, an adequate operating model for missile warning, cyber incidents, maritime disruption, or infrastructure shocks that unfold across hours or days.

13.2 Structured Decision Rights Across Domains

A region cannot act coherently if decision rights are vague. One of the most common weaknesses in regional arrangements is the assumption that shared purpose alone will clarify who decides what when pressure arrives. In practice, ambiguity about authority can generate delay, duplication, and political friction precisely when time matters most (Hurwicz, 1973; Pollack, 2003; Tsebelis, 2002). Therefore, GCC 2030 requires structured decision rights across domains. Structured decision rights specify, for each domain, what kind of decision belongs at which level. Some matters should remain wholly national. Some should trigger regional notification but not joint authorization. Some should activate technical coordination without requiring full political alignment. A smaller set may require pre-agreed collective pathways where continuity or regional stability is at stake.

Structured decision rights solve two recurring problems at once. First, they reduce uncertainty about what the regional layer is actually for. Second, they reassure states that regional function will not expand unpredictably into domains they never intended to share. Clear decision rights are operationally useful and politically protective. The GCC's constitutional design already provides a starting point. The Supreme Council lays down higher policy and approves major recommendations, the Ministerial Council develops proposals and coordinates implementation pathways, and the

Secretariat General prepares studies, reports, and follow-up. Those arrangements are politically protective, but they also show why finer-grained, domain-specific decision rights are needed below the summit level if the region is to act under pressure rather than only deliberate during formal review.

13.3 Crisis Protocols and Emergency Coordination

Crisis is the point at which the difference between institutional appearance and operational capability becomes starkest. Many regional systems look coherent under ordinary conditions and then fragment under stress because the protocols governing emergency coordination were never adequately designed. The Gulf cannot afford that weakness in the domains identified earlier in this paper. Crisis protocols matter because they pre-commit the region to pathways of action before political confusion and time pressure distort judgment. They clarify who is notified, which channel activates first, how technical and political levels interact, what thresholds trigger higher-level escalation, and what minimum coordination is expected even where strategic preferences diverge (Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Schelling, 1960).

Emergency coordination is especially important in domains characterized by speed and spillover. A missile incident, cyber disruption, maritime anomaly, major infrastructure failure, or logistics shock may not require identical national responses, but it does require that the region know how information and decisions move. The objective is reduced latency, clearer interfaces, and preservation of continuity during the early phase of disruption. Recent GCC practice suggests growing awareness of this need. In March 2023, the Ministerial Council noted the continued completion of the requirements of the Unified Military Command and its affiliated units and centers. In December 2024, the Supreme Council endorsed the appointment of the Commander of the Unified Military Command and welcomed initiatives tied to the digital transformation of joint security services. These developments do not yet amount to a full crisis architecture, but they indicate movement toward standing operational pathways rather than reliance solely on improvised coordination.

13.4 Standing Analytical Mechanisms Instead of Episodic Meetings

Regional systems often suffer from a recurring pathology: they treat analysis as an event rather than a function. Problems are discussed in meetings, reports are commissioned in response to disruption, and strategic review occurs intermittently rather than continuously. This produces a region that can deliberate periodically but struggles to maintain a live analytic picture of its own environment (Holland, 1995; Maier, 1998). The Gulf needs standing analytical mechanisms. These are not simply more meetings or more reports. They are structured arrangements for continuous interpretation, comparison of assessments, strategic review, and cross-domain analysis. Their purpose is to keep the regional layer cognitively active between political peaks. Standing analytical mechanisms are especially valuable because they bridge sensing and decision. They help translate raw awareness into pattern recognition, identify where separate events are actually linked, and provide a common basis for escalation when needed. They also create institutional memory by retaining lessons across cycles of disruption and personnel turnover (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998).

The GCC already has a minimal institutional basis for such a function. The Charter assigns the Secretariat General responsibility for preparing studies on cooperation and coordination, preparing periodic reports, following up implementation of Supreme Council and Ministerial Council decisions, and preparing additional reports and studies when requested. These capacities have historically remained tied to a largely procedural and periodic model of regionalism. GCC 2030 requires them to be extended toward more continuous analytic activity in selected strategic domains.

13.5 Regional Dashboards, Fusion Cells, and Common Data Layers

If standing analysis provides the cognitive backbone of decision architecture, then dashboards, fusion cells, and common data layers provide much of its practical instrumentation. A regional dashboard is a structured visibility layer that brings selected indicators, incident reporting, continuity status, and domain-specific information into formats that can be shared, updated, and acted upon. A fusion cell is a bounded analytic or operational node where information from multiple sources is combined, interpreted, and routed. A common data layer is the technical substrate that allows different systems to interact with sufficient compatibility to support shared visibility and action (Maier, 1998; Parker et al., 2016; Pollack, 2003).

Regionalism increasingly depends on interface quality. It is not enough for each state to possess information separately if the region lacks the technical and procedural means to create usable shared understanding. Dashboards and fusion cells reduce

fragmentation in awareness. Common data layers reduce fragmentation in information architecture. Together, they make selected forms of interoperability operational. The GCC's cybersecurity information-sharing platform is an early empirical example of this logic. The Supreme Council in 2024 commended the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and the launch of a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among Council states, explicitly linking it to the maintenance of the shared Gulf security system. That is exactly the kind of bounded visibility and data-sharing layer on which future regional dashboards, fusion cells, and common data layers can build.

13.6 Designing the Region for Action, Not Only Consultation

A future Gulf regional order must be designed for action, not only consultation. Consultation will remain necessary. No strategically serious region can function without high-level political dialogue, diplomatic signaling, and regular intergovernmental contact. But consultation alone is too weak a design principle for a region whose critical exposures now lie in fast-moving, interdependent, and infrastructure-heavy domains.
Designing for action means building the pathways through which awareness becomes decision and decision becomes execution. It means recognizing that regional capability is not measured only by the number of meetings held or declarations issued, but by whether the region can reduce latency, preserve continuity, and coordinate bounded responses when pressure arrives. It means giving institutional form to the middle layer between summit diplomacy and isolated national action.

A forum consults; a strategic system can also act. The difference lies not in rhetoric but in architecture. Action-capable regionalism does not require uniformity of preference, nor does it abolish political disagreement. It requires only that certain categories of shared exposure have predesigned pathways of visibility, assessment, escalation, and response. The GCC's recent trajectory points in this direction, but only partially. The 2024 Vision for Regional Security, the continuing work around the Unified Military Command, the cybersecurity strategy, the information-sharing platform, and the digital transformation of joint security services all suggest movement away from largely declaratory regionalism toward more operational forms. But they also highlight how much further the project can develop. The strategic question is not whether the GCC can state common intent, but whether it can build decision pathways that make common action possible in the domains where fragmentation has become strategically costly.

14. Futures of GCC Regionalism: Scenarios to 2030

The Gulf's future remains politically open. Different regional futures become plausible once sovereignty, capability, and resilience have to be organized across a shared strategic stack. Scenario thinking is useful here for two reasons. First, it distinguishes more clearly between what is strategically possible, what is politically likely, and what is normatively desirable. Second, it makes visible the gap between the capability the region may need and the order toward which it may actually drift. The four scenarios below are not predictions. They are stylized futures organized around different relationships among sovereignty, competition, capability, and design (Holland, 1995; Maier, 1998). The GCC's current trajectory already provides the raw material for these futures. The region has an existing base of economic regionalism through the Economic Agreement and customs-union framework, a renewed strategic vocabulary through the GCC Vision for Regional Security, and a growing set of security and cyber initiatives reflected in the 45th Supreme Council session. The question is what kind of regional order that foundation will ultimately support. These scenarios should be read as endpoints and as trajectories separated by branching points, as the figure below shows.

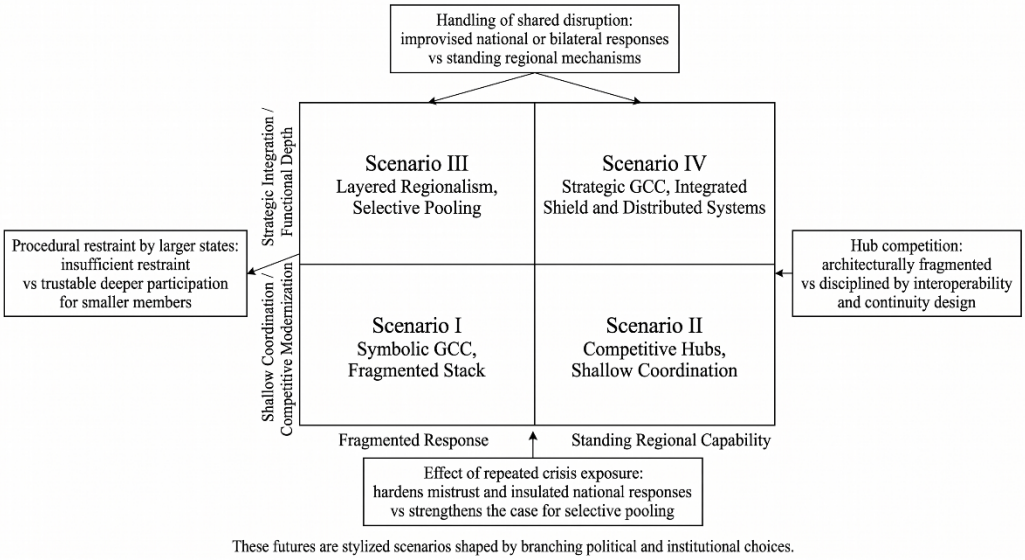

Figure 6: Four Futures of GCC Regionalism to 2030

14.1 Scenario I: Symbolic GCC, Loosely Connected Stack

The first scenario is the continuation of symbolic regionalism. In this future, the GCC survives politically and ceremonially, but remains operationally thin. Summits continue. Diplomatic language of unity persists. Certain economic and regulatory arrangements remain in place. But the region's deeper strategic stack stays fragmented. Critical systems continue to be built, governed, and interpreted mainly through national silos, with only limited regional layering. This future is most likely if leaders continue to prefer the legitimacy of regional language without accepting the institutional and technical discipline required for shared operating layers. Its main driver is not active opposition to regionalism, but the repeated deferral of difficult design choices in the name of flexibility, sovereignty caution, or short-term political convenience. In this scenario, the GCC retains relevance as a forum of consultation and signaling, but not as a serious capability system. Maritime, cyber, infrastructure, digital continuity, logistics resilience, and selected warning functions remain undercoordinated. The region reacts to crises, but largely through ad hoc improvisation or bilateral patches rather than standing regional architecture. This future remains plausible because the GCC already has enough institutional durability to survive as a political forum even without deep operational transformation. But continuity of forum is not the same as continuity of function.

14.2 Scenario II: Competitive Hubs, Limited Coordination

The second scenario is one of continued national dynamism combined with limited regional depth. In this future, Gulf states continue to modernize aggressively through hub competition: ports, logistics, digital services, finance, cloud, data, aviation, platforms, and strategic infrastructure all expand. The region becomes richer in nodes, more globally relevant, and more technologically advanced. But coordination among those nodes remains shallow, and regional resilience remains underbuilt. This is a more sophisticated future than Scenario I because it does not depend on stagnation. On the contrary, it is a future of intense ambition and visible success. Nevertheless, because success is pursued competitively, the region's connective logic remains weak. Interoperability develops unevenly. Standards diverge where common interfaces would be valuable. Shared continuity architecture lags behind national upgrading (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Cowen, 2014; Hurwicz, 1973; Katz & Shapiro, 1985; Keohane, 1969). This future is driven by a simple logic: national modernization continues to generate high political returns, while regional connective design remains harder, slower, and less visibly rewarding. It is also highly plausible because it extends tendencies already visible in GCC development rather than requiring a major political break.

14.3 Scenario III: Layered Regionalism, Selective Pooling

The third scenario is the one most closely aligned with the design logic developed in this study. In this future, the GCC does not become a federation and does not aspire to a single constitutional endpoint. Instead, it develops as a differentiated regional architecture in which various forms of regionalism are applied by function. Some domains remain largely national with better coordination. Others move toward harmonization or interoperability. A smaller number develop shared platforms, joint operational functions, or selective pooling where the cost of fragmentation is especially high (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Scenario III depends on a careful balance between light constitutionalism and working functionality. It does not require a thick supranational authority, but it requires more than loose consultation alone. Its central institutional requirement is clear decision rights: which matters remain national, which require regional notification, which activate shared technical protocols, and which require collective authorization. This is how layered regionalism becomes a system rather than a list of separate initiatives. Cooperation can advance in one layer without waiting for full agreement in all others, but the layers must be connected by shared standards, escalation rules, information interfaces, and review mechanisms (Oates, 1999; Hurwicz, 1973; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

This future becomes plausible when repeated exposure to shared disruption makes the costs of fragmentation politically undeniable, but not yet so catastrophic that states retreat into purely national crisis management. Its trigger is not idealized unity. It is the gradual recognition that selective regional function is cheaper, safer, and more credible than repeated improvisation. In this future, the Gulf becomes regionally denser without becoming politically uniform. Maritime awareness, selected warning functions, cyber continuity interfaces, logistics dashboards, resilience standards, and certain common data layers begin to form a more coherent regional intelligence system. Institutional design remains thin in constitutional form, but stronger in function. Trust-building safeguards are visible enough to lower the cost of participation for smaller members. Larger members accept some procedural restraint in exchange for deeper and more credible capability. Scenario III is also the future most consistent with recent GCC initiatives. The 2024 Vision for Regional Security, the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy, the cybersecurity information-sharing platform, and the continued development of joint-security structures all point toward selective thickening in specific domains rather than constitutional transformation across the board.

14.4 Scenario IV: Strategic GCC, Integrated Shield and Distributed Systems

The fourth scenario is the most ambitious. In this future, the Gulf moves beyond layered regionalism toward a more mature strategic system. The key development is an integrated regional shield across selected external and continuity functions, supported by distributed systems beneath it. This does not mean full political union. But it does mean that in certain high-stakes domains, especially warning, missile and air defense support layers, maritime continuity, selected cyber resilience functions, and critical strategic infrastructure, the regional layer acquires substantial operative significance.

This future would likely require a stronger combination of external pressure, successful earlier regional experimentation, and clearer acceptance by larger states of institutional restraint as the price of deeper capability. Without those conditions, the strategic logic of this scenario may remain strong while its political feasibility remains limited. Its defining feature is that the GCC becomes recognizably strategic in form. It possesses stronger regional sensing, more developed fusion and decision interfaces, clearer crisis protocols, deeper cross-domain continuity mechanisms, and more credible resilience in the face of external disruption. The shield is integrated where fragmentation is too costly. The supporting architecture remains distributed so that no single over-concentrated center turns shared capability into unbounded discretion (Ashby, 1956; Deutsch et al., 1957; Hurwicz, 1973; Maier, 1998; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Walt, 1987). This is the scenario most closely aligned with the full implications of recent GCC security language. The Vision for Regional Security explicitly links regional security to maritime protection, missile and drone threats, energy stability, and broader regional stability, while the Supreme Council's 2024 statement highlights cybersecurity cooperation and joint-security modernization. These moves do not amount to Scenario IV. But they reveal the contours of the strategic system toward which the GCC could evolve under stronger pressure and more sustained political will.

14.5 Which Future is Most Plausible, and Which is Most Desirable

By 2030, Scenario I is probably not the most plausible future. The density of technological, infrastructural, security, and geoeconomic pressures is too great for the Gulf to remain simply symbolic. The more likely competition is between Scenario II and Scenario III. Scenario II (competitive hubs with limited coordination) has strong momentum behind it. It fits current patterns

of ambition, node-building, and nationally led modernization. It requires the least political reordering and satisfies sovereignty instincts because it allows states to remain visibly autonomous while still pursuing scale and global relevance. For these reasons, it may well be the default trajectory if no deliberate regional design effort emerges. But Scenario III (layered regionalism with selective pooling) is the strongest strategic candidate. It does not require utopian political transformation. It requires recognition that certain shared functions are difficult to manage credibly through fragmented architectures alone, and that functionally differentiated design offers a middle path between federation and forum. As for desirability, Scenario III is the strongest overall option. It best balances political feasibility, strategic adequacy, sovereign pluralism, and trust-building safeguards. Scenario IV may be more strategically impressive, but it likely exceeds what the current political ecology of the Gulf can sustain without much deeper trust. Scenario II may be easier, but it risks producing a region of impressive nodes and weak collective resilience.

The most important movement by 2030 is likely to occur between Scenarios II and III. A shift in that direction would most plausibly occur if one or two bounded pilot mechanisms, such as maritime information exchange, cyber incident classification, or logistics continuity mapping, prove both operationally useful and politically safe. The GCC already possesses enough institutional legacy to drift into Scenario II, and enough strategic pressure to justify movement toward Scenario III. The difference between those futures will depend on whether Gulf regionalism remains content with episodic coordination or deliberately develops thinner but stronger functional architecture.

15. A Roadmap to 2030: Sequencing Regional Capability

A viable regional project must answer not only what should be built, but how the region moves from its current condition to a denser architecture of capability without triggering political sensitivities that could slow the process. The answer is sequencing, not a single grand design imposed all at once. Sequencing matters because Gulf regionalism faces two constraints at the same time. The first is functional urgency. Many domains already suffer from a mismatch between shared exposure and fragmented architecture. The second is political caution. Trust remains uneven, asymmetry remains salient, and concerns about over-centralization remain rational. A roadmap must do two things at once: build enough capability early to prove usefulness, while avoiding premature institutional thickness that would activate concerns about over-concentration (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Tsebelis, 2002).

This chapter proposes a four-phase roadmap to 2030. These phases are better understood as cumulative thresholds of regional capability. As shown in the figure below, the principle behind the roadmap is simple. Regional capability should be built in ways that lower the political cost of the next step. Early phases should generate visible value without over-centralizing authority. Middle phases should reduce fragmentation in selected systems. Later phases should deepen only where trust has been partially earned through successful function and where the costs of continued fragmentation have become unmistakable.

The GCC's own institutional record makes such sequencing plausible. The Charter already provides a thin constitutional framework; the Economic Agreement and customs union created precedents for phased economic integration; the Joint Defense Agreement and Unified Military Command created precedents for selective security thickening; and the 2024 regional security vision, cybersecurity strategy, and information-sharing platform show that functional deepening can occur without constitutional union.

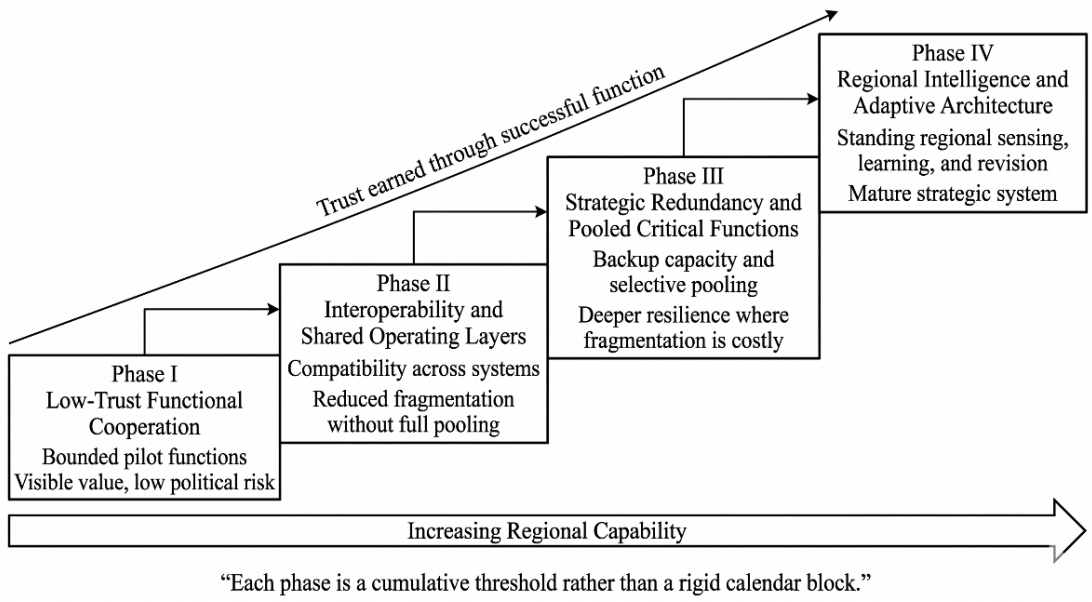

Figure 7: A Four-Phase Roadmap to GCC 2030

15.1 Phase I: Trust-building functional cooperation

The first phase begins from realism. The region should build cooperation in ways that do not require full trust at the outset. The correct starting point is low-trust functional cooperation: narrowly defined, clearly bounded forms of regional action that produce visible operational benefit without requiring deep constitutional commitment (Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008; Sandler, 2006). Phase I should build confidence through use. States are more likely to accept denser regional functions later if the earliest arrangements show that shared capability can be built without hidden over-concentration of authority. That means Phase I should focus on domains where the functional logic is clear, the political stakes are manageable, and the gains from improved coordination are quickly visible. In practical terms, the most plausible first movers are maritime information exchange, cyber incident classification and notification, logistics continuity mapping, and selected resilience standards for critical infrastructure. These areas suit Phase I because they improve visibility and continuity without immediately requiring deep pooling, centralized command, or constitutionally sensitive transfers of authority. A sensible test of Phase I success is simple: can the region create repeatable technical cooperation that proves useful in practice and politically safe in interpretation?

The institutional form in this phase should remain deliberately thin. No commanding regional center is required. Rotational convening, distributed technical nodes, domain-specific working mechanisms, and bounded mandates are preferable. Phase I builds regional habits of function that reduce uncertainty about cooperation while keeping the constitutional layer light. The GCC has already taken small but meaningful steps that fit this first phase. The 2024 final statement of the Supreme Council commended the development of the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and the launch of a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among the Council states. Likewise, the 2024 Vision for Regional Security calls for stronger coordination mechanisms in maritime security and energy-supply protection, which are exactly the kinds of bounded, function-first domains suitable for a Phase I opening.

The GCC's recent move toward a regional cybersecurity information-sharing platform offers a useful example of what bounded regional statecraft can look like in practice. It does not require constitutional union, centralized command, or politically unrealistic trust. Instead, it creates a limited but repeatable mechanism for shared visibility in a domain where exposure is already regional in effect. Its significance lies less in institutional grandeur than in operational logic. It suggests that the GCC can begin to build region-scale intelligence functions by starting with politically manageable domains where the functional case is clear and the mandate can remain tightly bounded. As such, it provides a practical illustration of Phase I in the roadmap proposed earlier.

Box 3: A prototype of low-trust regional function: the GCC cybersecurity information-sharing platform

Sources: Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024

15.2 Phase II: Interoperability and Shared Operating Layers

The second phase moves from contact to compatibility. Once low-trust functional cooperation has produced modest confidence and clarified where fragmentation is most costly, the next objective is to make systems work together more reliably. This is the phase of interoperability and shared operating layers. Interoperability matters because many regional failures are not failures of political intent but failures of interface design. States may agree on the need for closer coordination and still lack the standards, technical compatibility, data structures, and operating procedures necessary to act together under pressure (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Maier, 1998; Simon, 1962). Therefore, Phase II focuses on reducing friction across national systems without requiring uniformity of institutions or broad transfer of authority.

Shared operating layers are one of the key concepts in this phase. They do not replace national systems. They sit above them or between them, creating common visibility and structured interaction in selected domains. Shared maritime pictures, regional dashboards, cross-border continuity maps, common incident layers, notification ladders, and defined operational data interfaces are all examples. Politically, this phase is more demanding than Phase I because interoperability creates deeper technical dependence and more persistent interaction. It requires stronger safeguards around access, auditability, data governance, and node distribution. But it remains easier than pooling because final authority can still remain clearly national. The GCC's own development provides usable precedents. The Economic Agreement and customs union already required common customs regulations, procedures, and a single-entry-point logic for tariff collection, showing that the Council can build shared operating layers when the functional rationale is clear. The 2024 cybersecurity information-sharing platform offers a more contemporary analogue in the digital-security domain. GCC 2030 should extend this logic beyond trade and cyber into maritime visibility, logistics continuity, and selected resilience interfaces.

15.3 Phase III: Strategic Redundancy and Pooled Critical Functions

The third phase is where regionalism becomes materially denser. By this stage, the region has already developed some habits of low-trust cooperation and some interoperable operating layers. The next step is to deepen resilience where the costs of fragmentation are highest. This means strategic redundancy and, in a smaller number of carefully defined domains, pooled critical functions. Movement into this phase should be conditional. It should be triggered only when earlier interoperability layers are working reliably and when at least one or two domains have already demonstrated that shared function can operate without institutional imbalance. Phase III should follow demonstrated functional success in earlier phases. Strategic redundancy matters because systems optimized for efficiency alone often remain vulnerable under stress (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Perrow, 1984; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). A mature regional architecture must identify where backup capacity, alternative pathways, distributed nodes, mutual support arrangements, or continuity reserves are needed. This applies across logistics, energy continuity, selected digital infrastructure, communications resilience, shared awareness layers, and other parts of the strategic stack where concentrated failure would have region-wide consequences.

Pooled critical functions should enter only selectively in this phase. The argument is not for generalized pooling. It is for bounded pooling where three conditions hold at once: shared exposure is already intense, fragmentation continues to create clear strategic weakness, and enough confidence has been built through earlier phases to make deeper function politically sustainable

(Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). The GCC's selective security evolution shows that this kind of bounded deepening is not alien to the region. The Joint Defense Agreement, the continued work on the Unified Military Command noted by the Ministerial Council in 2023, and the 2024 appointment of the Commander of the Unified Military Command all suggest that when functions are politically salient and fragmentation visibly costly, the GCC can move beyond consultation into more operative arrangements.

15.4 Phase IV: Regional Intelligence and Adaptive Architecture

The fourth phase is the most mature and the most demanding. It is the stage at which the GCC begins to function recognizably as a regional intelligence system in the fuller sense developed in Chapter 10. This means not only shared function in selected domains, but also more integrated capacity to sense, process, coordinate, remember, and adapt across the strategic stack (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998). A regional intelligence architecture does not imply a centralized Gulf super-state. It implies that the regional layer has become cognitively and institutionally active enough to interpret its environment continuously and revise itself in light of experience. At this point, shared operating pictures are more mature, cross-domain analysis is more structured, crisis interfaces are more reliable, memory is institutionally retained, and after-action learning feeds back into redesign.
Adaptation is the defining feature of this phase. Earlier phases may create capability, but Phase IV creates the capacity to revise capability. It is what distinguishes an organized region from an intelligent one. If the strategic environment changes, the regional system can update its protocols, redesign interfaces, alter redundancy assumptions, and learn cumulatively rather than episodically (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Holland, 1995; Perrow, 1984). Official GCC practice is still developing toward this stage. But the combination of a regional security vision, a multiyear cybersecurity strategy, digital transformation of joint security services, and growing recognition of shared maritime and infrastructure vulnerabilities suggests that the direction of travel is not purely symbolic anymore. So, Phase IV describes a later stage of maturity that the earlier phases are meant to build toward.

15.5 Triggers, Constraints, and Political Conditions for Movement Across Phases

The roadmap proposed here is not automatic. Movement depends on triggers, constraints, and political conditions. Understanding them is essential because they determine whether Gulf regionalism remains symbolic, remains limited in coordination, or matures into a denser strategic architecture.

- The first category is triggers. Repeated crisis exposure is one: when the costs of fragmentation become unmistakable in practice, the political case for stronger regional arrangements sharpens (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Technological density is another. As cloud systems, platforms, data architectures, and critical infrastructures become more layered, the cost of interface failure rises. External pressure also matters. Chokepoint dependence, geopolitical contestation, and reduced confidence in outside guarantors can all raise the value of regional self-organization. Finally, successful early experiments matter. If Phase I mechanisms produce visible benefit without over-concentration of authority, they create a basis for deeper movement.
- The second category is constraints. Intra-regional trust deficits remain the most obvious one, but not the only one. Bureaucratic fragmentation, competing national modernization agendas, divergent external alignments, technical incompatibility, and sensitivity around information-sharing also matter. These constraints do not make regionalism impossible, but they make design quality decisive.
- The third category is political conditions. Credibility of trust-building safeguards is the first. Smaller members must believe that deeper participation will not become quiet dependence without safeguards. Restraint by larger states is the second. Rule-bound asymmetry is politically sustainable in a way that unbounded discretion is not (Lake, 2009; Tsebelis, 2002). Functional proof is the third: each phase must show enough operational value to justify the next. Modularity is the fourth: not all domains or all states will move at the same speed, and the architecture must allow differentiated progress without collapsing the broader project.

The GCC's own record reinforces this logic. Progress has tended to occur where functional need, political timing, and bounded institutional design lined up: the Economic Agreement and customs union in the economic sphere, the Joint Defense Agreement and Unified Military Command in selected security functions, and the recent cybersecurity strategy and information-sharing platform in the digital-security sphere. This suggests that GCC 2030 will not be built by one treaty moment, but by repeated convergence between functional pressure and politically sustainable design.

The GCC should begin with a limited number of bounded, high-value functions where regional exposure is already clear and political risk remains manageable, instead of attempting a constitutional leap. Over the next twelve to twenty-four months, the

most realistic priorities are maritime information exchange, cyber incident classification and notification, logistics continuity mapping, and selected resilience standards for critical infrastructure. Over the medium term, these should evolve into interoperable operating layers, common dashboards, and clearer crisis protocols in a small number of domains. Over the longer term (and only where earlier phases prove both useful and politically safe) the region can consider strategic redundancy mechanisms and highly selective pooled functions. The objective is not regional grandeur. It is repeatable regional capability with visible trust-building safeguards (GCC, 2024; Supreme Council of the GCC, 2024; Statement issued by the 155th session of the GCC Ministerial Council, 2023).

Part V. Conclusion

16. The Future of the Gulf: From Regional Organization to Regional Statecraft

This work began from dissatisfaction with inherited ways of thinking about regionalism in the Gulf. Too much discussion remains trapped between two unsatisfactory images. One view measures the GCC against integration models developed elsewhere and treats it as incomplete because it has not become sufficiently deep, supranational, or unified. Another reduces it to a diplomatic forum of consultation, symbolism, and periodic coordination. Both images capture something real. Neither is adequate to the strategic condition the Gulf now inhabits. The central argument has been that the Gulf's future is more complex than a simple binary between union and fragmentation. The region is already more than a forum because it already exists as a dense security and interdependence complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). But it is unlikely to become a federation, because asymmetry, limited trust, and sovereignty sensitivity remain too structurally important to be designed away (Lake, 2009; Söderbaum, 2016; Tsebelis, 2002). The real challenge lies in how the Gulf organizes capability across a shared strategic stack under conditions of complexity. A different vocabulary is needed. The most consequential regional questions now concern maritime continuity, missile exposure, cyber resilience, cloud dependence, logistics, standards, energy redundancy, and other dual-use infrastructures that blur the old divide between market and shield (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Sovereignty, in turn, is not weakened only by pooling. It can also be weakened by fragmentation when key functions cannot be performed credibly in isolation (Howorth, 2019; Marks et al., 1996; Perrow, 1984). From this perspective, the future of the GCC is a statecraft question as well as a constitutional one. The region needs regional intelligence functions, institutional safeguards, and decision architectures capable of governing the condition it already inhabits. A more plausible horizon is the GCC as a strategic system, organized through differentiated sovereignty and regional intelligence architecture.

16.1 Why the GCC's Future is Not Unity But Capability

GCC regionalism should be measured by capability at the correct scale. This is an argument against making unity the analytical measure of regional success, not against unity as a political sentiment or civilizational aspiration. Regions become strategically serious because they can perform the functions that matter under real conditions of exposure, speed, and uncertainty (Maier, 1998; Sandler, 2006). The Gulf's major pressures are increasingly functional. Missile warning does not wait for constitutional convergence. Maritime continuity is not preserved by rhetoric. Cyber resilience does not emerge from summit language alone. Strategic infrastructure becomes no less vulnerable because states affirm common purpose (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The region must be judged by the substance behind its appearance of unity and by its ability to see, coordinate, and absorb disruptions across the systems that now define its operating environment. Capability is also the right horizon because it permits differentiation. Not every domain requires the same form of regionalism. Some functions may remain national. Some may require harmonization or interoperability. Some may justify shared platforms or joint operational functions. A smaller number may require selective pooling (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). What matters is whether the right function is organized at the right scale.

16.2 Why Sovereignty Will Survive By Being Redesigned

The second conclusion concerns sovereignty. The sovereignty argument is practical: sovereignty survives only when it remains effective (Howorth, 2019). A state may preserve juridical authority while still becoming strategically thinner if warning, continuity, redundancy, and leverage depend on systems it cannot govern alone.

The paper proposed differentiated sovereignty as a design principle. Differentiation means that sovereign functions are not all treated alike. Some remain best exercised through nationally distinct institutions. Others require shared interfaces, regional standards, common operating layers, or bounded pooling. Sovereignty has to be redesigned so control remains usable under regional conditions (Howorth, 2019; Marks et al., 1996; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). This redesign is politically difficult because smaller members seek safeguards against over-centralization while larger states worry about excessive constraint. But it is also politically necessary. If sovereignty is defended only in symbolic terms, it may become increasingly thin in operational terms. The more strategic stacks deepen across maritime, digital, infrastructural, and geoeconomic layers, the less plausible it becomes to imagine sovereignty as insulation. The GCC's own constitutional design already hints at another path: equality of member states, unanimity on substantive matters, rotating presidencies, and limited institutional thickness combined with room for specialized mechanisms where function requires them. That is a sovereignty-preserving architecture of bounded regionalization, beyond the all-or-nothing choice between insulation and over-concentration.

16.3 Why the Region Must Be Built as a Strategic System

The third conclusion concerns the region itself. The Gulf must now be approached as a strategic system not simply as an organization of states. Its key functions arise through the interaction of multiple layers: maritime corridors, missile exposure, cyber continuity, cloud architecture, logistics, standards, energy redundancy, payments, platforms, and orbital support (Maier, 1998). These layers form a shared operating environment whose behavior increasingly conditions the strategic position of every Gulf state (Cowen, 2014; Farrell & Newman, 2019). Building the region as a strategic system does not imply general centralization. The architecture most suited to the Gulf is distributed, bounded, modular, and trust-building. But it must still be a system. It must have stronger sensing functions, better processing, clearer decision interfaces, more resilient continuity layers, institutional memory, and adaptive capacity across selected domains (Ashby, 1956; Maier, 1998). It also requires rules that make asymmetry governable and redundancy where efficiency alone creates brittleness (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Perrow, 1984; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). A loosely connected and externally exposed strategic system will remain brittle. A more intelligent architecture gives the GCC a path to resilience. Recent GCC documents show that this systems turn is both analytical and increasingly visible in official regional language. The Vision for Regional Security links regional security to maritime lanes, energy stability, missile and drone threats, cybersecurity, and broader regional stability. The 45th Supreme Council statement extends the same logic by linking cybersecurity cooperation to the shared Gulf security system.

16.4 Final Reflections on GCC Regionalism in the Age of Complexity

A middle path runs through functionally differentiated regionalism across a shared strategic stack, supported by thin institutions, strong functions, distributed nodes, trust-building safeguards, and region-scale intelligence capabilities. Whether the GCC moves in this direction will depend less on declarations of unity than on practical statecraft. The future of the Gulf lies in regional statecraft, not regional organization alone: separate markets where diversity strengthens resilience, and a shared shield where fragmented arrangements weaken collective resilience. The first real test of seriousness will not be another summit communiqué. It will be whether the region begins to build one or two standing intelligence functions in a bounded domain. The clearest candidates are maritime information exchange, cyber incident classification and notification, logistics continuity mapping, or a shared operating layer for selected infrastructure resilience functions. These are not maximalist proposals. They do not require constitutional union, centralized command, or full political trust at the outset. They require something more demanding than declaratory regionalism: repeatable regional function that remains usable across political fluctuations.

If the region begins to build such mechanisms, then the regional intelligence-system lens will have moved from theory toward institutional expression. The shared strategic stack will have been acknowledged analytically and operationally. Differentiated sovereignty will have become visible in practice, as member states selectively build common function while preserving political safeguards against over-centralization. The 45th Supreme Council's endorsement of the Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy (2024–2028) and a platform for sharing cybersecurity information among the Council states already offers a partial precursor. It does not amount, however, to the broader regional intelligence architecture envisioned in this study. It shows what a first bounded test of seriousness looks like in practice: a domain-specific, politically manageable, repeatable shared function built around visibility, information exchange, continuity, and practical action.

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