

Second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate

Nov. 1-2, 2015

Opening Remarks

Dr. Ebtesam al-Ketbi, President of Emirates Policy Center (EPC)

Your Highnesses, Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to Abu Dhabi, the capital city of future and ambitious thoughts.

I welcome the brains that are always indulged in understanding and interpreting the world and providing the best alternatives for the present and future of humanity.

We have always been keen at EPC on not making “Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate” as a mere media event or public relations campaign. Therefore, our insistence to keep on organizing this annual gathering is motivated by the following:

1. Make Abu Dhabi a center for regional and international gatherings and a hub for strategic thinking.
2. Attract influential elites in regional and global decision-making to enable decision-makers in Abu Dhabi to benefit from the ideas, views and initiatives presented by these experts and scholars during this gathering, and keep the UAE an active player in the international system in a manner that serves global stability and justice.
3. Consolidate EPC’s approach in addressing strategic issues of concern to the UAE and GCC countries so as to make the Center capable of developing applicable alternatives and recommendations for public policy and political decisions.
4. Institutionalize the previous successes of Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, as well as, its intellectual and political products in its endeavor to examine regional and global developments in political, security, economic and development domains.

Since EPC believes in accumulative knowledge and the necessity to understand the status quo to move forward, we would like to present to you

the summary of “Abu Dhabi First Strategic Debate” which aimed to identify the standing of GCC countries in the regional and international political scene, particularly with the return of “Geopolitics” to the international relations system and given the overlap between regional and international geopolitical projects and GCC security and interests.

Following are the most significant conclusions of Abu Dhabi First Strategic Debate:

First: GCC countries have become influential regional actors in the wake internal and external conflicts that affected major Arab countries with strategic weight, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria; a situation that enhanced the significance of GCC countries and created more responsibilities for them. While GCC countries depended in the past on the power and strategic depth of these countries to protect the Arab regional system, in general, and GCC security, in particular, against the threats of other regional projects, GCC countries have now become an influential regional and global actors that other Arab and regional countries can turn to for resolving crises and restoring stability.

Second : The US is still considered the most influential global actor that can effectively deal with challenges facing GCC countries. The US itself deeply believes that no parallel global power can commit itself to ensuring the GCC security as the US does, particularly in times of crises. Of course, the US believes so because it depends on its military presence and effective logistics in the region, not to mention its close political and economic relations with GCC countries.

Third: There exist some major global powers that don’t adopt active policies towards the GCC region or refrain from contributing to its security, like Russia and China for different reasons and perspectives. Russia’s current political approach towards GCC countries is primarily based on economic relations and the importance of coordinating energy policies, because the continued decline of oil prices would threaten its national economy and foreign interests. Politically, Russia wishes to integrate Iran in a GCC regional system in order to approach the warm waters in the Arabian Gulf and enhance its role in the region given its close relations with Tehran. As for China, the foreign policy of Beijing is based on neutrality and non-interference vis-à-vis conflicts in the GCC region. Instead, China’s top priority is to guarantee a continued economic growth and employs foreign relations to serve this goal. Therefore, Beijing’s relations with GCC countries are nearly limited to trade

and economic domains so that it can meet its abundant needs of oil and gas supplies necessary for its major industrialization and development projects.

Fourth: There is no EU effective defense and security strategy towards GCC countries, nor is there an integrated EU economic strategy towards the GCC region. Although, a secure and stable GCC region is a European interest, the UE depends more on the US and bilateral relations between its member states and GCC nations in this regard. It is worth noting here that the crisis in Ukraine prompted the UE to adopt a strategy that reduces its dependence on the Russian gas supplies as much as possible and finds alternative sources of gas supplies. Therefore, the EU is more interested now in starting a strategic dialogue with GCC nations, which gives these countries a better opportunity to develop such cooperation in a manner compatible with their visions and requirements.

Fifth: It seems that NATO is interested in developing the forms of cooperation with GCC countries in order to reach an effective security partnership. However, some factors seem to have impeded that endeavor, including the fact that NATO's relations with the region are limited to arrangements with individual states of the GCC, not with the GCC as a regional organization. Moreover, some major GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Oman have not yet joined the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" according to which security relations between GCC countries and NATO can be coordinated and further developed.

Sixth: The Iranian geopolitical project has clearly adopted a sectarian policy in the Arab region through Tehran's direct intervention and support of Shiite political groups and Militias. Iran's approach is quite evident in Iraq as it uses Iraqi Shiite parties to fill the strategic vacuum in the country and consolidate their control over national institutions and capabilities. Similarly, Shiite Iraqi and Lebanese groups are supporting al-Assad's regime in Syria, while Iran is also supporting the Houthis' control over state institutions in Yemen. Finally, Iran encouraged and incited Shiite minorities in neighboring countries. All of this enhanced Iran's regional influence from and its endeavor to become a center for Shiites in the world.

Seventh: There is a central regional project for Turkey, which considers the Arab region as the core of this project. So far, Ankara has adopted soft power and economic partnerships to promote its role and increase its influence in the region. However, Turkey's relations with several GCC counties have been shaken due to Ankara's attempts to capitalize on conditions created by the

“Arab Spring” by supporting Islamist parties and movements to achieve its regional geopolitical project.

After the First ADSD has dealt with the position of the Gulf in the geopolitical map of regional and international powers. This year’s debate will tackle the following issues:

1. The position of the Gulf in the new world, which is going through rapid changes, and in a region going through violent shifts.
2. Understanding economic, political and security challenges, as well as, opportunities provided by these international and regional changes for Gulf countries.
3. Foreseeing expected scenarios for the Gulf role in the regional landscape, especially after “Operation Storm of Resolve” and the nuclear deal with Iran.
4. Predicting the most likely scenarios for the region within the context of regional powers courted and powers countered and mapping global trends and strategic shocks.
5. Analyzing opportunities that are still available for Gulf countries to effectively deal with strategic shocks to be active in drafting and shaping the regional order.

The second ADSD is part of an intellectual effort by EPC that attempts to establish a paradigm to understand and explain shifts inflicted on world and regional orders and predict their trajectories. The world is changing in a rapid and irregular qualitative way. This change comes in the form of shocks that are hard to deconstruct, analyze and understand; thus, making it more difficult to predict changes, events and developments. Shifts, shocks and cyberspace created new challenges to understand power and the process of building power.

This understanding requires a knowledge of various concepts of power; each country or system has its own understanding that fulfills its needs and developmental priorities and serves to build a strong society and state based on this understanding.

Having said that, we see an urgent need to reproduce a new system of international relations that responds to the following shifts:

1. Shifts on international and regional alliances.
2. The complicated concept of power, especially after the emergence of non-state actors, cyberspace threats, the impact of technological development on industries and the changing nature of economy.

3. Expansion of the terrorist phenomenon and success in funding its networks.
4. The international spread of organized crime and the growing power of drug cartels.
5. The expansion of arm trade networks.
6. The crisis of refugees' influx.
7. Environmental and climate change challenges.
8. The global challenges of public health.

We think that the new system of international relations must be based on two key concepts:

The first one is justice in a new concept based on inclusive participation in drafting and defining justice, as well as, an agreement by all on mechanisms to serve justice. By calling for justice in the world order, however, we do not mean the idea of ideological protestation or utopic idealism, rather, a justice that makes world order more viable and ensures a reduction of wars, struggles and extremism.

The second concept is credibility because it consolidates the survival of world order and ensures its continuity, especially the credibility of major powers in their commitments and alliances.

Finally, we reiterate, once again, that EPC is a thin tank that presents an understanding that interacts with various concepts in the world and the region, tries to determine direction of events and their implications on Gulf countries and the Arab region in general. Within this context, we build scenarios, suggest alternatives and recommendations for decision-makers to take part in rationalizing the decision-making process. Our short experience proved that UAE decision-makers deal with openness and respect with elites and think tanks, which helped us to develop our work and encouraged us to move on to ambitious prospects.

Once again, I welcome you to ADSD and Abu Dhabi and invite you to start the proceedings of the Second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.