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Small State Activism and the Limits of Strategic Autonomy: The United Arab Emirates and the Logic of Managed Regional Overstretch

SUMMARY

This article develops a neoclassical realist framework to explain how the United Arab Emirates (UAE), despite its small territorial size, limited manpower, and demographic constraints, has sustained an expansive pattern of regional activism across Yemen, Libya, and the Horn of Africa/Red Sea corridor. Situating the UAE within the post-2011 transformation of Arab regional order, the article introduces two interrelated conceptual innovations: managed strategic autonomy and managed regional overstretch. Managed strategic autonomy is distinguished from hedging, omnibalancing, and strategic diversification by its active intent to reshape the patron-client relationship rather than distribute risk or cultivate domestic legitimacy. Managed regional overstretch extends Kennedy's classical overstretch theory beyond great-power hegemonic overextension to small states whose strain emerges through dispersion and institutional proliferation rather than resource depletion alone. Empirically, drawing on a structured, diverse-case comparison of three theatres selected for their variation in the concentration versus dispersion of strategic commitment, the article documents the UAE's cyclical pattern of intervention, consolidation, and

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calibrated disengagement, anchored in time-stamped evidence: the 2019 Yemen drawdown; the 2020 Libyan repositioning following Turkish military intervention; the 2021 al-Ula reconciliation process; the 2022 Houthi strikes on Abu Dhabi; the 2023–2024 Red Sea shipping crisis; and the 2023 Sudan conflict. The article contributes to small-state IR theory, Gulf foreign policy analysis, and the overstretch literature and addresses the following falsifiable predictions: the UAE will sustain post-overstretch postures through commercial-infrastructure and partner-substitution instruments rather than direct military redeployment, and distributed overstretch in the Horn will delay recalibration relative to concentrated kinetic overstretch in Yemen.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates (UAE), small state activism, strategic autonomy, regional overstretch, hedging, Gulf foreign policy.

Aktivizam malih država i granice strateške autonomije: Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati i logika kontrolisanog prekomernog regionalnog angažovanja

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad razvija neoklasično-realistički okvir za objašnjenje načina na koji su Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati (UAE), uprkos maloj teritorijalnoj veličini, ograničenim ljudskim resursima i demografskim ograničenjima, uspeli da održe ekspanzivan obrazac regionalnog aktivizma u Jemenu, Libiji i na Rogu Afrike i koridoru Crvenog mora. Polazeći od transformacije arapskog regionalnog poretka nakon 2011. godine, rad uvodi dva međusobno povezana konceptualna pojma: kontrolisanu stratešku autonomiju (*managed strategic autonomy*) i kontrolisano prekomerno regionalno angažovanje (*managed regional overstretch*). Kontrolisana strateška autonomija razlikuje se od hedžinga, sveobuhvatnog uravnotežavanja (*omnibalancing*) i strateške diverzifikacije po tome što podrazumeva preoblikovanje odnosa patron-klijent, umesto pukog raspoređivanja rizika ili nastojanja da se osigura domaći politički legitimitet. Pojam kontrolisanog prekomernog regionalnog angažovanja proširuje Kenedijevu klasičnu teoriju prekomernog angažovanja izvan okvira hegemonске prekomerne ekspanzije velikih sila, na male države čije se opterećenje ispoljava kroz prostornu disperziju angažmana i proliferaciju institucionalnih mehanizama, a ne isključivo kroz iscrpljivanje raspoloživih resursa. Empirijski, rad se oslanja na strukturisanu komparaciju različitih slučajeva, pri čemu su odabrana tri

regionalna poprišta zbog varijacija u koncentraciji, odnosno disperziji strateškog angažmana. Analizom se uočava ciklični obrazac delovanja UAE koji obuhvata intervenciju, konsolidaciju i povlačenje, oslanjajući se na vremenski precizno određene empirijske pokazatelje: smanjenje vojnog angažmana u Jemenu 2019. godine; promenu pozicioniranja u Libiji nakon turske vojne intervencije 2020. godine; proces pomirenja u okviru al-Ula sporazuma 2021. godine; napade Huta na Abu Dabi 2022. godine; krizu pomorskog saobraćaja u Crvenom moru 2023–2024. godine; kao i sukob u Sudanu od 2023. godine. Rad doprinosi teoriji međunarodnih odnosa malih država, analizi spoljne politike zemalja Zaliva i literaturi o prekomernom angažovanju, te razmatra sledeća proverljiva predviđanja: UAE će održavati obrasce delovanja nakon perioda prekomernog angažovanja prvenstveno putem instrumenata komercijalne infrastrukture i zamene partnerskih aktera, umesto neposrednog ponovnog vojnog angažovanja; dok će distribuirano prekomerno angažovanje na Rogu Afrike odložiti proces strateškog prilagođavanja u odnosu na koncentrisano kinetičko prekomerno angažovanje u Jemenu.

Ključne reči: Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati (UAE), aktivizam malih država, strateška autonomija, prekomerno regionalno angažovanje, hedžing, zalivska spoljna politika.

Introduction

Why does a small state with limited manpower, no conscript army, and a native population of under one million sustain simultaneous military, political, and infrastructural commitments across three distinct regional theatres over a decade? This question sits at the intersection of two undertheorised problems in International Relations scholarship: the sources of small-state foreign policy activism and the conditions under which external commitments generate structural strain sufficient to compel strategic recalibration (Antwi-Boateng et Alhashmi 2022, Almezaini et Rickli 2017). Accordingly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provides a uniquely tractable case for examining both. Since 2011, the UAE has intervened militarily in Yemen and Libya, constructed an integrated logistics and basing network along the Red Sea western littoral, and managed an evolving posture of selective disengagement and partner substitution across all three theatres, all while operating under the material constraints conventionally associated with structural passivity.

Notwithstanding the volume of existing scholarship, it offers partial but inadequate accounts of this pattern. Structural realist frameworks treat small states as essentially reactive, their strategic options determined by dependency on external security guarantees and the distribution of

capabilities in the international system (Waltz 1979, Walt 2013, Handel 1981). While this tradition illuminates the constraints the UAE faces, it cannot explain the activist trajectory the UAE has chosen. A subsequent wave of scholarship on niche diplomacy (Henrikson 2005), asymmetric balancing (Paul 2005), and Gulf foreign policy diversification (Gause, Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East 2011, Kamrava, Small State, Big Politics 2020) has demonstrated that small states can exercise meaningful agency under great-power ambiguity. However, these accounts have not theorised the limits of such agency or the mechanisms by which over-extension generates recalibration pressure. Most directly relevant are frameworks focused on hedging (Tessman et Wolfe 2011, Kuik 2016), omnibalancing (David 1991), and strategic diversification (Gause, Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East 2011), all of which capture partial dimensions of UAE behaviour while missing a critical feature: the UAE's activism is not merely distributive or risk-minimising but constitutes a purposive effort to reshape the terms of its patron-client relationships and restructure the regional environment in its favour (Mason 2018).

In light of this gap, the article introduces two interrelated conceptual innovations within a neoclassical realist framework (Rose 1998, Lobell, Ripsman et Taliaferro 2009). The first, and arguably more foundational, is managed strategic autonomy: a goal-directed diversification of alignments and selective engagements through which a small state reduces structural dependency on any single external patron while preserving operational flexibility across multiple coalition contexts. Crucially, the "managed" qualifier signals that autonomy is not sought as an absolute condition but is continuously constructed through asymmetric information management, selective burden-sharing, and infrastructural independence. This distinguishes the concept from hedging, which is primarily risk-distributive, and from omnibalancing, which privileges domestic regime survival over outward-projecting strategic ambition. The second concept is managed regional overstretch: the accumulation of dispersed commitments across military, political, and infrastructural domains that cumulatively generate coordination costs, diminishing strategic returns, and recalibration pressures, even when no single theatre constitutes resource exhaustion. By extending Kennedy's classical overstretch logic beyond hegemonic powers to the small-state context, the article demonstrates that the strain from which the UAE periodically recalibrates emerges not from attempted dominance but from institutional proliferation and the interdependency of simultaneously maintained partner networks.

The interaction of these two concepts produces what the article terms a cyclical model of UAE foreign policy: four identifiable phases, Activation, Expansion, Diffuse Overstretch, and Recalibration, through which the UAE has moved across each of its three primary theatres. The empirical argument is grounded in time-stamped turning points: the 2019 Yemen military drawdown (Juneau 2020); the 2020 Libyan ceasefire and the decisive effect of Turkish military intervention (Kardaş 2020); the 2021 al-Ula reconciliation process (Kabalan 2021); the 2022 Houthi strikes on Abu Dhabi (Mutschler et Meininghaus 2024); the 2023–2024 Red Sea shipping crisis (Romaniuk 2024); and the 2023 Sudan conflict (H. Ali 2024). Together, these episodes constitute a longitudinal record of the cyclical model's operation and permit cross-case comparison of concentrated versus distributed overstretch, a theoretically significant distinction with direct implications for how and when recalibration is triggered.

The article makes three contributions to International Relations scholarship. First, it extends neoclassical realist theory to small-state activism in a non-European, non-great-power context, integrating systemic pressures with elite-level mediating variables traceable through triangulated empirical evidence. Second, it reconceptualises strategic autonomy from an EU-centric industrial sovereignty concept into a relational, operational strategy whose defining characteristic is active patron-client reshaping rather than mere risk distribution. Third, it extends overstretch theory beyond hegemonic overextension to the domain of small-state activism, introducing the analytically consequential distinction between concentrated single-theatre overstretch (Yemen) and diffuse multi-domain distributed overstretch (Horn of Africa), a distinction with direct implications for the timing and character of recalibration. The article is structured as follows. Section 1 develops the theoretical framework and operationalises both core concepts. Section 2 situates the argument within the existing IR literature on small-state behaviour, hedging, and overstretch. Sections 3 through 5 present the three empirical cases. Section 6 conducts a structured cross-case synthesis. Section 7 draws theoretical conclusions, addresses scope conditions, and charts directions for future research.

Constructing Autonomy under Constraint: A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Small-State Activism

The theoretical approach adopted here is grounded in neoclassical realism, which explains foreign policy behaviour through the interaction of systemic constraints and domestic-level mediating variables (Rose 1998, Lobell, Ripsman et Taliaferro 2009, Rathbun 2008, R. Schweller 2018).

Conversely, unlike structural realist accounts that treat state behaviour as a near-direct reflection of the distribution of capabilities, neoclassical realism emphasises that systemic pressures are filtered through elite perceptions, threat assessments, and state capacity constraints. Foreign policy outcomes are therefore the product of how decision-makers interpret external uncertainty and translate it into strategic choices under conditions of imperfect information and bounded rationality.

Notably, a critical enabling variable in the UAE case is the highly centralised federal structure, in which Abu Dhabi's political and economic predominance, and more recently the consolidation of strategic decision-making authority under MBZ, has produced a foreign policy apparatus with unusually high responsiveness to elite threat perceptions and an unusually low threshold for rapid strategic commitment (Lootah 2021, Antwi-Boateng et Binhuwaidin 2017, Miller et Verhoeven 2019).

This is an enabling condition rather than a fixed feature of the state: the model's institutional responsiveness, rapid activation, and rapid recalibration are bound to the continuity of a particular configuration of centralised leadership perception, and a future diffusion of decision-making authority or a generational leadership transition could alter the speed and character of both expansion and recalibration in ways the present framework does not independently predict.

Strategic autonomy, as developed in the European integration context, refers primarily to a state or organisation's capacity for independent action in defence, technology, and industrial policy without dependence on external actors (Biscop 2018, Zandee, et al. 2020, Franke et Varma 2018, Fiott 2021). In this conventional formulation, autonomy is principally about industrial and technological self-sufficiency, a great- or middle-power concern. The UAE's case differs structurally: what matters is not industrial sovereignty but coalition manoeuvrability and the ability to pursue operationally distinct objectives within nominally shared alliance structures (Kirmanj et Tofik 2023).

By contrast, managed strategic autonomy, as conceptualised here, refers to a goal-directed diversification of alignments and selective engagements through which a small state reduces structural dependency on any single external patron while preserving flexibility across multiple coalition contexts. The 'managed' qualifier is critical: autonomy is not sought as an absolute condition but is continuously constructed through asymmetric information management, selective burden-sharing, and infrastructural independence.

This concept is distinguished from adjacent frameworks as follows. Hedging (Tessman et Wolfe 2011, Kuik 2016) refers to risk distribution through simultaneous maintenance of ties with potentially competing great powers, designed to preserve optionality without committing to any side. Crucially, however, managed strategic autonomy goes further: the UAE is not merely hedging between patrons but actively using its cross-cutting partnerships to extract operational space unavailable to states fully aligned with a single patron (Guéraiche 2023). The distinction is observable: a pure hedger avoids alignment decisions; the UAE makes alignment decisions while preserving the capacity to deviate from coalition mandates on specific operational questions (e.g., southern Yemen, eastern Libya front).

Omnibalancing (David 1991) focuses on how leaders align externally to manage both external threats and domestic regime threats simultaneously, often privileging the latter. Notwithstanding the relevance of regime security to UAE decision-making, the primary driver of Emirati activism is outward-projecting threat assessment and the structuring of regional order to constrain ideological competitors, rather than domestic legitimization.

Strategic diversification (Gause 2011, Kamrava 2020) is the concept closest to managed strategic autonomy, denoting a Gulf state's broadening of security and economic partnerships beyond a single patron. It differs from managed strategic autonomy on the dimension of intent: diversification describes a portfolio of relationships without specifying what the state does with the resulting room for manoeuvre, whereas managed strategic autonomy specifies the purposive use of that manoeuvre space, operational divergence from coalition mandates and the construction of patron-independent infrastructure to actively renegotiate the terms of patron-client dependency rather than merely to hold a wider set of relationships in reserve. Stated concretely, managed strategic autonomy is autonomy from indispensability to any single patron, exercised over the choice of coalition partners, operational priorities, and infrastructural dependencies. It is measured through observable indicators of managed strategic autonomy, which include (1) simultaneous maintenance of operationally distinct partnerships with competing great powers (US security umbrella, French defence cooperation, Russian-linked interlocutors via Libya, and Chinese infrastructure investment); (2) demonstrated operational divergence from coalition mandates on discrete issues (UAE prioritisation of southern Yemen over Houthi rollback, UAE-STC support against Saudi-backed Islah party); and (3) acquisition of independent basing or logistics

infrastructure providing autonomous projection capacity independent of any single patron's permission (Assab base in Eritrea, Berbera port in Somaliland, and Camp Lemonnier adjacency in Djibouti) (Cannon et Rossiter 2017).

Classical overstretch theory, derived from Kennedy's analysis of great-power imperial overextension, posits that states decline when their external military commitments exceed their economic and productive capacity to sustain them (Kennedy 1988). While this formulation was designed for hegemonic powers, its application to small states requires modification because small-state overstretch does not arise from attempted hegemony but from the dispersion of limited resources across multiple simultaneously managed theatres. Layne and Posen extend the concept to US relative decline but retain the resource-depletion logic (Layne 2012, Posen 2014). The proxy warfare literature (Mumford 2013, Salehyan 2010, Tamm 2016, Rauta 2021, Marshall 2016) offers a closer approximation, documenting how external patrons face diminishing returns and escalating costs from local partner management in fragmented civil conflicts. Accordingly, managed regional overstretch is conceptualised here as the accumulation of dispersed commitments across military, political, and infrastructural domains that cumulatively generate coordination costs, diminishing strategic returns, and recalibration pressures, even when no single theatre constitutes resource exhaustion. What distinguishes this condition from a neutral accumulation of strategic burdens is the trajectory of marginal returns: overstretch obtains specifically when the marginal strategic value generated by each additional commitment declines while its coordination and reputational costs continue to rise, producing a widening gap between commitment and return rather than a merely larger but proportionate portfolio of engagements.

The 'managed' qualifier signals that recalibration occurs before systemic collapse.

Drawing on the preceding conceptualisation, operational criteria for diagnosing overstretch include (i) dispersion costs, the fiscal, institutional, and human capital burden of maintaining simultaneous multi-theatre engagement; (ii) coordination burden, the increasing difficulty of managing politically and militarily distinct partner networks simultaneously; (iii) diminishing returns, observable slippage between stated objectives and achieved outcomes per theatre; and (iv) substitution effects, increasing reliance on local proxies, private military/security contractors, and infrastructure firms (DP World, Abu Dhabi Ports) as substitutes for direct state deployment, indicating retrenchment of direct commitment.

Consequently, this operationalisation permits the concept to be distinguished from a vague narrative of 'becoming overstretched': overstretched is present when at least three of these four indicators co-occur. Recalibration is observed when a drawdown of direct deployments is accompanied by increased partner reliance and a diplomatic de-escalation signal towards at least one regional rival.

A three-of-four threshold is used rather than requiring all four indicators, since not every indicator is equally observable across theatres with uneven documentation (a constraint that affects the Horn of Africa case in particular), and rather than treating any single indicator as sufficient, since isolated cost pressures or routine policy adjustment could otherwise be mistaken for overstretched; convergence across a majority of independently observable indicators offers a conservative but attainable evidentiary bar.

Throughout the empirical analysis, UAE commitments are further distinguished by instrument type: direct military deployment (own forces and assets), proxy and partner-based commitment (financing, training, and arming local militias and allied forces), and commercial-infrastructure statecraft (port concessions, logistics investment, and basing arrangements pursued through state-linked commercial entities). The shift across these three instrument types, rather than uniform disengagement, is what the recalibration phase of the cyclical model is designed to capture.

Collectively, the interaction between managed strategic autonomy and managed regional overstretched produces a cyclical pattern in UAE foreign policy with four identifiable phases: (1) Activation, heightened elite perception of systemic fragmentation generates incentives for proactive engagement; (2) Expansion, diversified interventions across multiple theatres enhance strategic footprint and autonomy; (3) Diffuse Overstretch, cumulative coordination costs, diminishing returns, and external counter-escalation create recalibration pressure; (4) Recalibration, selective drawdown, proxy substitution, and diplomatic repositioning restore sustainable equilibrium.

It is worth stating the design's analytic architecture explicitly. Activism, the UAE's observable pattern of intervention across theatres, is the empirical phenomenon to be explained. Managed strategic autonomy is the elite strategic orientation that motivates activism. Managed regional overstretched is the intervening structural mechanism through which sustained activism generates cumulative strain. Recalibration, the selective drawdown, proxy substitution, and diplomatic repositioning observed at the close of each cycle, is the dependent variable: the outcome the

framework seeks to explain and the point at which the model's predictions are empirically tested. Separating these four terms in this way addresses the risk, noted above, of allowing the same episodes to serve simultaneously as evidence of overstretch and as evidence of recalibration; in the empirical sections that follow, overstretch is established first, through the co-occurrence of the indicators specified above, before recalibration is assessed as a subsequent and analytically distinct outcome.

The research design is a structured, diverse-case comparison within a single country, process-tracing the cyclical sequence across three theatres that constitute the units of analysis. Yemen, Libya, and the Horn of Africa/Red Sea corridor were selected because they vary systematically in the concentration versus dispersion of strategic commitment and in the dominant instrument type – direct military deployment, proxy warfare, and commercial-infrastructure statecraft, respectively – while holding the state, its elite decision-making structure, and the broader regional timeframe constant. This design permits comparison of concentrated kinetic overstretch (Yemen) against diffuse, multi-domain overstretch (the Horn), with Libya occupying an intermediate position, and is therefore suited to testing the framework's core distinction rather than to establishing population-level generalisation, a limitation addressed further in the concluding discussion of scope conditions.

Small-State Agency and Its Limits: Situating Managed Strategic Autonomy in the IR Literature

The study of small state behaviour in International Relations has long been shaped by structural assumptions that privilege the limiting effects of anarchy and relative power asymmetry on small state agency (Waltz 1979, Mearsheimer 2001). Within this tradition, small states are conceptualised primarily through dependency and alignment logics: balancing against threats (Walt 2013), bandwagoning with dominant powers (R. L. Schweller 1994), or pursuing neutrality as existential insurance (Handel 1981). Notably, these approaches share a common limitation: they treat small states as essentially reactive to structural pressures rather than as agents capable of shaping their strategic environment (Mason 2018).

This literature's treatment of 'small states' as a single category also requires qualification before it can be applied to the UAE. Thorhallsson and Wivel distinguish size, a matter of territory, population, and conventional military capacity, from capability, the institutional, financial,

and administrative resources a state can bring to bear regardless of its physical scale (Thorhallsson et Wivel 2006).

Cooper and Shaw similarly frame small-state agency as a function of resilience rather than vulnerability alone (Cooper et Shaw 2009). On demographic and territorial criteria, the UAE is unambiguously small: a native population of under one million and no conscript army. On capability and positional criteria, however, it is not weak: sovereign wealth reserves, an integrated logistics and ports sector, and a location astride the Bab-el-Mandeb chokepoint give it the capacity to project influence and externalise operational costs onto proxies, partners, and commercial infrastructure unavailable to demographically comparable but resource- or position-poor small states. The UAE is therefore better categorised as a small-but-capable, geostrategically consequential state, and it is precisely this combination, rather than smallness alone, that renders its activism analytically distinctive.

Notwithstanding this deterministic inheritance, a significant body of subsequent scholarship has challenged its core premises. Research on niche diplomacy (Henrikson 2005), asymmetric balancing (Paul 2005), and small state foreign policy agency (Thorhallsson et Wivel, *Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know?* 2006, Hey 2003) has demonstrated that small states can exercise meaningful agency, particularly in environments characterised by great power ambiguity, regional fragmentation, or institutional weakness. In the Gulf specifically, Gause and Kamrava have documented a post-2003 shift towards strategic diversification and autonomous regional engagement (Gause, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East* 2011, Kamrava, *Small State, Big Politics* 2020), while Roberts and Krieg have detailed the UAE's specifically assertive variant of this trend (Roberts, *Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World* 2020, Krieg, *Security Assistance to Surrogates – How the UAE Secures Its Regional Objectives* 2024).

The concept most directly adjacent to managed strategic autonomy is hedging. Tessman and Wolfe define hedging as a strategy of simultaneous engagement with potentially competing powers to preserve optionality (Tessman et Wolfe 2011), while Kuik distinguishes between return-maximising and risk-contingency hedging (Kuik 2016). Goh develops a related omni-enmeshment framework for Southeast Asian states managing China's rise (Goh 2008, Goh 2019). These formulations capture the UAE's maintenance of multiple great-power partnerships but do not account for its active operational deviation from coalition mandates or its

use of infrastructure diplomacy to construct independent leverage. In short, and most critically, the UAE is not merely distributing risk; it is actively reshaping the strategic environment to expand its operational autonomy (Abozaid 2020).

Omnibalancing (David 1991, Elisheva 2004) offers a different adjacent framework, arguing that developing-world leaders align externally primarily to neutralise domestic threats. The UAE's regional activism does not fit this pattern for the reasons articulated in Section 1.2.

The overstretch literature originates in Kennedy's thesis that great powers decline when military commitments outpace economic productive capacity (Kennedy 1988). The proxy warfare literature (Mumford 2013, Salehyan 2010, Tamm 2016) documents how external patrons face diminishing returns and escalating costs from local partner management in fragmented civil conflicts, including through principal-agent problems, monitoring costs, and moral hazard dynamics.

A dimension of the existing literature that the foregoing review has not yet addressed, but which bears directly on the theoretical positioning of managed strategic autonomy, concerns the conditions under which small states transition from reactive to constitutive actors in regional order-building (Thorhallsson et Wivel 2006, Cooper et Shaw, *The Diplomacies of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience* 2009, Williams, Lobell et Jesse 2025). The scholarship surveyed above largely frames small-state agency as a response to structural permissiveness, great-power retrenchment, regional fragmentation, or institutional weakness that create space that small states exploit. This framing systematically underspecifies the degree to which small-state activism itself reshapes the structural conditions to which it is ostensibly responding. In the Gulf context specifically, the UAE's interventions in Yemen and Libya did not merely respond to regional fragmentation; they selectively deepened it by empowering sub-state actors, fragmenting political opposition coalitions, and establishing facts on the ground that foreclosed negotiated settlements preferred by competing regional powers, notably Qatar and Turkey (Dogan-Akkas 2021, Krieg 2024). This constitutive dimension, the capacity to reshape rather than merely navigate the regional environment, is precisely what distinguishes managed strategic autonomy from the hedging and omnibalancing frameworks with which it is most frequently conflated, and it is what makes the UAE case theoretically generative beyond its immediate empirical domain. Paradoxically, however, this constitutive capacity also generates a structural feedback problem that neither the hedging nor the overstretch literature has adequately theorised:

the more successfully the UAE reshapes its regional environment, the more it creates dependencies, partner networks, and reputational commitments that constrain its subsequent freedom of manoeuvre. The activation of the Southern Transitional Council, the consolidation of Haftar's eastern Libyan authority, and the establishment of Red Sea port concessions are simultaneously achievements of managed strategic autonomy and new sources of structural constraint, binding the UAE to actors and outcomes whose trajectories it can influence but not control (Salisbury 2020, Pedde 2017). It is this recursive quality, whereby the instruments of autonomy-generation progressively constitute new forms of structural dependency, that the empirical cases in Sections 3 through 5 are designed to illuminate, and that the existing IR literature on small states has not yet systematically incorporated into its analytical frameworks.

Intervention, Concentration, and Recalibration: The UAE in Yemen

The Saudi-led coalition intervention launched in March 2015, following the Houthi capture of Sanaa and advance towards Aden, created the structural opportunity for Emirati engagement (Marieke 2017). The UAE's formally stated objective was coalition support for the restoration of Yemen's internationally recognised government under President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (Darwich, The Saudi intervention in Yemen: Struggling for status 2018). Paradoxically, however, from the outset, Emirati strategic behaviour revealed differentiated priorities that diverged from Saudi coalition leadership (Esfandiary 2023). UAE objectives can be reconstructed from triangulated sources: MBZ's documented concern about al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as a transnational threat (Hindmarsh 2023); field reporting on UAE-financed and trained forces concentrated in southern Yemen and coastal Hadramawt rather than on the Houthi front in the north (Juneau, The UAE and the War in Yemen: From Surge to Recalibration 2020, Dogan-Akkas 2021); and UN Panel of Experts reports documenting UAE operational conduct diverging from stated coalition objectives (Slijper 2017, UNSC 2017).

The UAE deployed a combination of instruments: direct military forces (estimated 3,500 troops at peak engagement, with air assets at Al Anad and naval forces in the Gulf of Aden) (Numan Telci et Öztürk Horoz 2018, Toomey 2025); financial and material support to allied militias (the Security Belt Forces and Elite Forces in southern Yemen); private military/security contractor deployments (Krieg 2022); and diplomatic support for southern Yemeni political actors (Salisbury 2020). Concurrently, the UAE prioritised Aden port rehabilitation and Socotra Island access, consistent with its

broader Red Sea logistics strategy pursued through Abu Dhabi Ports and DP World in parallel commercial channels (Ding 2024). By 2017–2018, the costs of sustained Yemen engagement had accumulated across multiple dimensions (Juneau, *The UAE and the War in Yemen: From Surge to Recalibration* 2020). Militarily, UAE forces suffered significant casualties relative to the country's small indigenous military population, with documented losses at Marib in September 2015 (over 50 killed in a single incident) creating acute domestic political sensitivity (The Guardian 2015, Hokayem et Roberts 2016). Furthermore, the UAE faced growing international scrutiny over civilian harm from coalition airstrikes, documented in UN Panel reports and Human Rights Watch investigations (Cumming-Bruce 2018, Human Rights Watch 2022), with direct implications for arms supply relationships with the UK and US (Bales et Mutschler, *A New Autocratic Way of War? Autocracy, Precision Strike Warfare and Civilian Victimization* 2026). In addition, the multiplication of armed factions under UAE patronage – the STC, the Hadrami Elite Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, and counter-terrorism units – created coordination costs that strained central management (Bales 2023).

As a result of these converging pressures, the formal recalibration occurred in June–July 2019, when the UAE announced a withdrawal of significant forces from frontline positions (Roberts 2020, Stoddard et Toltica 2021). This was officially framed as a strategic reassessment towards 'naval and air capabilities', but it represented an observable shift from direct territorial engagement to maintaining indirect influence (Darwich 2020, Juneau 2021). Tellingly, the timing correlates with multiple simultaneous overstretch indicators: accumulating casualties, international reputational pressure, the beginning of STC-Saudi tensions, and parallel resource demands from Libya (Badi 2020). Subsequently, January 2022 provided a secondary recalibration trigger. Houthi drone and ballistic missile strikes on Abu Dhabi, targeting Abu Dhabi National Oil Company facilities and Al-Dhafra Air Base (Reuters 2022, Chulov 2022), represented the first significant successful attack on UAE territory, fundamentally altering the strategic cost calculus (Roberts 2025). Critically, the strikes demonstrated that sustained engagement with Yemen had generated retaliatory exposure to homeland vulnerability.

Consequently, post-2019 UAE-Yemen engagement has operated through indirect channels: continued financial and material support to STC forces; diplomatic backing for STC participation in the Riyadh Agreement process; and maintenance of maritime security presence in the Gulf of Aden without frontline territorial commitment (Brehony 2020, Stoddard et Toltica 2021). This posture reflects the recalibration

mechanism's logic: strategic interests are preserved through partner substitution and infrastructure leverage (Aden port, Socotra access) rather than direct military deployment, thereby reducing direct operational costs while preserving influence architecture. Assessed against the UAE's own stated minimal objective, securing southern Yemen and the port of Aden rather than achieving national reunification under Hadi's government, the Yemen theatre illustrates that recalibration and strategic success are compatible outcomes. Aden has remained under UAE-aligned STC control, and southern Yemen has continued to anchor UAE logistics and counter-terrorism cooperation well after the 2019 drawdown.

Consolidation and Counter-Escalation: Ideological Alignment, External Competition, and Strategic Repositioning in Libya

UAE engagement in Libya began in the 2014 Second Libyan Civil War (W. Ali 2025). Following the post-2011 collapse of Libyan state institutions, two competing governmental authorities emerged: the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA, Tripoli-based, backed by Turkey and Qatar) and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives aligned with the Libyan National Army (LNA) under General Khalifa Haftar (Lacher 2020). The UAE's alignment with the LNA was rooted in elite threat perceptions centred on political Islam: LNA opponents in western Libya included Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions and militias associated with networks the UAE classified as threats to regional governance stability (Litsas 2023). Notably, this ideological framing was explicit in UAE leadership statements. MBZ's documented reference to the Muslim Brotherhood as 'the greatest danger facing the Arab world' (Worth 2020) anchors the Libya intervention in elite cognitive framing. Paradoxically, however, as in Yemen, the purely ideational account is incomplete: Libya's proximity to European energy markets, its role in Mediterranean migration routes, and its position in sub-Saharan transshipment networks introduced commercial and positional dimensions to Emirati calculus (Melcangi et Mezran 2022).

UAE operational instruments in Libya included (1) direct arms transfers to LNA forces documented in UN Panel of Experts on Libya reports 2015–2021, constituting violations of the UN arms embargo (UNSC 2015, UNSC 2021); (2) air support missions from UAE-operated bases in eastern Libya and in Sudan (Krieg 2024); (3) financial transfers to LNA-aligned political actors; and (4) diplomatic backing for Haftar within Arab League settings (Bakir 2020). By 2019–2020, the Libya engagement had generated mounting overstretch pressures. The LNA's April 2019 offensive towards Tripoli,

which Haftar launched without full UAE endorsement, according to informed reporting, extended the engagement beyond Emirati comfort zones and increased exposure to a protracted conflict without a decisive outcome (Zoubir 2020, Melcangi et Mezran 2022).

The October 2020 Libya ceasefire and the preceding scale of Turkish military intervention constituted the critical external counter-escalation recalibration trigger (Kardaş 2020). The Turkish deployment of Bayraktar TB2 drones, which demonstrably neutralised UAE-supplied LNA armour, and the introduction of layered air defences that constrained UAE air operations effectively closed off the military escalation pathway (Besenyő et Málnássy 2024). Accordingly, the recalibration choice, acceptance of the October 2020 ceasefire and subsequent diplomatic repositioning, reflects the cost-benefit logic of managed strategic autonomy: preserving influence through indirect means when direct military competition exceeds the optimal engagement threshold (Thomas 2020). Subsequently, the post-2020 UAE-Libya posture has shifted towards diplomatic and economic instruments (Krieg 2024). UAE participation in discussions within the Berlin Process on Libya, alongside selective reduction of overt LNA support, illustrates the mode-switching characteristic of recalibration (Hedges 2021).

An alternative reading would treat the October 2020 ceasefire as a straightforward military defeat rather than a voluntary strategic recalibration; the framework responds that the two are not mutually exclusive, external counter-escalation is one of the trigger mechanisms the model specifies, and what distinguishes recalibration from mere defeat is the UAE's subsequent substitution of diplomatic and commercial instruments to preserve influence rather than a full withdrawal from the theatre. On the UAE's minimal terms, the outcome remains favourable: Haftar's LNA continues to control eastern and much of southern Libya, including its oil-producing territory, preserving the core strategic asset the UAE's intervention was designed to secure.

Commercial Statecraft and Distributed Strain: The UAE in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Corridor

The Horn of Africa and Red Sea corridor represent the infrastructural and maritime extension of the UAE's regional strategy, combining security-commercial rationale in a configuration distinct from the Yemen and Libya theatres (Mansour et Ahmed 2019). The strategic logic is, in this instance, transparent: The Red Sea/Bab el-Mandeb passage carries approximately 12–15% of global maritime trade and constitutes a critical energy export

corridor (Liyew 2024). Consequently, control over or influence within key nodes along this corridor provides the UAE with positional leverage that compensates for limited kinetic capabilities. UAE objectives in this theatre include securing reliable maritime access for Abu Dhabi/Dubai commercial shipping, establishing a network of logistics and basing nodes providing independent power projection capacity, countering competing Chinese, Turkish, and Iranian influence networks in the Horn, and shaping governance outcomes in Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia/Somaliland, and Sudan towards pro-UAE alignment (Pollack 2020).

The UAE's Horn of Africa engagement has been primarily infrastructural rather than kinetically military (Terefe et Tesfaye 2024). Key documented interventions include (1) the Assab, Eritrea, base operational from 2015, hosting UAE military aircraft and ground forces used in Yemen operations (Telci et Öztürk Horoz 2018); (2) the Berbera, Somaliland, port development agreement signed 2016, DP World 30-year concession (Stavis et Fitch 2016), including military facility components (Ali et Mumin 2025); (3) the Port Sudan development discussions, 2017 MOU (Walsh, Koettl et Schmitt 2023), subsequently complicated by Sudanese political transitions; and (4) the Bosaso, Puntland port agreement (DP World concession, 2017) (Dua 2023). These investments collectively constitute an integrated logistics and influence network along the Red Sea western littoral. This pattern reveals, at its clearest, the commercial-security interaction: DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports function simultaneously as commercial entities generating economic return and as strategic instruments providing the UAE with naval access, logistics hubs, and political leverage that no purely military basing strategy could deliver at comparable political cost (Mogielnicki 2021).

A case in point, the Horn of Africa engagement illustrates diffuse overstretch, a form of structural strain that emerges not from any single overcommitment but from the proliferation and coordination of multiple lower-intensity engagements across geographically dispersed nodes (Donelli et Gonzalez-Levaggi, *Crossing Roads: The Middle East's Security Engagement in the Horn of Africa* 2021). Observable indicators include (1) increasing management complexity as the UAE simultaneously administers Eritrea security cooperation, Somaliland port development, Puntland counter-piracy engagement, and Djibouti diplomatic competition (The Economist 2018); (2) political disruption of infrastructure agreements (Port Sudan suspended following the 2019 Sudanese revolution; Djibouti DP World dispute demonstrating host-state renegotiation risk) (Young et Khan 2022); (3) competitive pressure from Chinese infrastructure lending requiring UAE counter-investment (I. N.

Telci 2021); and (4) the 2023 Sudan civil war, which directly disrupted UAE plans for continued Port Sudan access (Soliman et Baldo 2025). Concurrent with these dynamics, the 2023–2024 Houthi campaign against commercial shipping in the Red Sea, comprising over 100 documented attacks on vessels, conducted in declared solidarity with Gaza (The World Bank 2025, Sainz 2025), provides a direct stress test for the framework's claims about diffuse overstretch and recalibration mechanisms (Dennard, et al. 2024).

Furthermore, the April 2023 outbreak of conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) introduced significant complications for UAE regional strategy. The UAE's reported links to the RSF through gold trade networks, private sector investment, and historical security cooperation created reputational exposure and diplomatic complexity (Soliman et Baldo 2025). Sudan had been an element of the UAE's Red Sea logistics architecture, and the conflict disrupted this dimension of the Horn of Africa portfolio (Donelli et Pericoli 2025). In this sense, Sudan 2023 functions as a diffuse overstretch materialisation: the cumulative commitments across the Horn, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan created a situation in which a single regional political disruption generated reputational, logistical, and diplomatic costs across the portfolio simultaneously (Mohammad 2023, Soliman et Baldo 2025). This confirms the framework's prediction that diffuse overstretch in the Horn of Africa theatre is qualitatively different from kinetic overstretch in Yemen: it emerges through institutional proliferation and network interdependency rather than battlefield attrition.

A further distinction is analytically necessary here. The Sudan conflict, the Djibouti DP World dispute, and the 2019 suspension of the Port Sudan MOU are exogenous shocks to the UAE's operating environment rather than instances of the UAE's own deliberate recalibration; they demonstrate the accumulation and materialisation of diffuse overstretch, but they do not by themselves show the UAE choosing to draw down or substitute instruments in response. The clearest available evidence of an endogenous recalibration signal in this theatre is commercial and geographic diversification away from politically compromised nodes, continued investment in Berbera and Bosaso alongside, and increasingly in place of, the stalled Port Sudan project, rather than a Yemen- or Libya-style shift from direct to indirect instruments, since the Horn engagement was predominantly commercial-infrastructural from its inception. This evidence is more provisional than the Yemen and Libya cases and is best read as an early and partial recalibration signal rather than a fully demonstrated one, a limitation consistent with the framework's own prediction that distributed overstretch produces recalibration that is harder

to diagnose and slower to materialise. Notwithstanding this evidentiary caveat, the theatre's minimal objective, securing durable maritime logistics nodes along the western Red Sea littoral, has been substantially achieved: the Assab and Berbera facilities have remained operational throughout the disruptions described above, continuing to generate commercial and strategic returns independent of any single host-state relationship.

Patterns of Strain and Adaptation: A Structured Cross-Case Synthesis

A structured comparison across the three cases against common indicators permits systematic assessment of the cyclical model; the following synthesises key findings. Across all three theatres, UAE's stated objectives at entry were broadly achieved in their minimal form: Aden was secured (Yemen), Haftar's eastern Libya authority was consolidated (Libya), and Red Sea logistics nodes were established (Horn). Furthermore, instruments became progressively more indirect across the cycle in each case, shifting from direct military deployment in Yemen's first phase to partner financing and infrastructural investment in Yemen's second phase and throughout the Horn. Notably, costs accumulated non-linearly: relatively contained in initial phases, then sharply elevated by external counter-escalation or domestic political disruption, Turkish intervention in Libya, the 2022 Houthis strikes on Abu Dhabi, and the 2023 Sudan civil war. Though recalibration triggers differed by case, they exhibited in all instances the common feature of multi-indicator co-occurrence within compressed time windows, a finding with direct implications for the operationalisation of recalibration thresholds.

The temporal sequence is consistent across cases even where its pacing differs: initial commitment (Yemen, 2015; Libya, 2014; the Horn, 2015-2017); accumulation of dispersion and coordination costs (Yemen, 2015-2018; Libya, 2019; the Horn, 2018-2023); a compressed strain signal that renders the accumulated costs newly salient (the Marib losses and mounting international scrutiny in Yemen, Turkish drone intervention in Libya, the Sudan civil war, and successive port disputes in the Horn); and recalibration (Yemen, mid-2019; Libya, late 2020; the Horn, partial and ongoing).

Drawing on this cross-case comparison, a theoretically consequential finding concerns the distinction between concentrated and distributed overstretch. In Yemen's first phase, overstretch pressures were concentrated in a single theatre; high kinetic intensity, high casualty exposure, high reputational cost, and recalibration were triggered by that single-theatre cost accumulation. In the Horn of Africa, by contrast,

overstretch is distributed: no individual commitment is unsustainable on its own, yet the aggregate coordination burden and the interdependency of simultaneously maintained partner relationships generate systemic fragility that resists conventional diagnosis. It should be emphasised that this distributed form of overstretch is analytically distinctive precisely because it may not be legible to decision-makers until the aggregate system approaches structural failure. As a result, states managing distributed overstretch may delay recalibration longer than those facing concentrated overstretch, since no single salient signal of unsustainability is present to trigger a strategic response. In light of this, the finding carries implications beyond the UAE case for how analysts and practitioners should monitor multi-theatre commitments in other small-state settings.

The preceding account does not claim that managed regional overstretch is the only force at work in these episodes, and several alternative explanations deserve explicit consideration. Regime-security concerns and anti-Islamist threat perception, most visible in Libya and, to a lesser extent, in the AQAP-focused rationale for the Yemen deployment, plausibly explain why the UAE entered each theatre. However, they do not explain why sustained engagement gave way to drawdown and instrument substitution at the specific junctures observed. Commercial statecraft considerations, particularly salient in the Horn of Africa, help account for the choice of infrastructural over kinetic instruments but do not explain the Yemen and Libya drawdowns, where commercial motives were secondary to security ones. The Saudi-UAE rivalry over the STC and southern Yemen (Alley 2026) and the permissive or constraining role of the United States in arms transfers and diplomatic cover, are plausible contributing pressures on the timing of the 2019 Yemen drawdown specifically, and are treated here as complementary rather than competing accounts: they help explain particular timing choices within a theatre, whereas the overstretch framework is addressed to the broader pattern, recurring across three heterogeneous theatres with different proximate causes, of expansion followed by multi-indicator strain followed by instrument substitution. Adjudicating more precisely between these complementary explanations and the proposed structural account is a task for future comparative research, most directly through the cross-national extension to Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia noted in the conclusion.

A further dimension of the cross-case synthesis that warrants explicit analytical attention concerns the relationship between recalibration and strategic learning, a dimension that the cyclical model implies but does not fully theorise. The evidence across the three cases suggests that recalibration is not merely reactive but cumulatively adaptive. Each

successive episode of overstretch-induced retrenchment has generated institutional adjustments in how the UAE structures its subsequent engagements. The post-2019 Yemen posture, characterised by proxy substitution and infrastructure leverage rather than direct military deployment, was not simply a response to accumulated costs in that theatre (Zoubir 2020); it served as a template that was consciously replicated in the post-2020 Libya repositioning and in the design of the Horn of Africa engagement from its inception (Young et Khan 2022).

This reading is inferred from the similarity of instruments across successive theatres rather than established directly from internal deliberation records or explicit elite statements referencing prior episodes; it is best treated as evidence consistent with strategic learning rather than as a conclusively demonstrated causal mechanism, and confirming it more directly is a task for future process-tracing research with access to such sources. With this qualification in place, the path-dependency observed in recalibration instruments suggests that the cyclical model, while analytically useful as a synchronic description of each theatre's trajectory, understates the diachronic learning dynamic that links the cycles across cases. Critically, however, this adaptive capacity carries its own systemic risk: the progressive standardisation of recalibration through commercial-infrastructure substitution has produced a strategic repertoire whose effectiveness is contingent on the continued permissiveness of host-state and great-power partners, a contingency that the Djibouti DP World dispute, the Port Sudan disruption, and the renegotiation pressures observable in Somaliland illustrate with growing frequency. In other words, the very instrument through which the UAE manages overstretch, the substitution of sovereign commercial leverage for direct military commitment, is itself subject to a form of second-order vulnerability: the concentration of recalibration capacity in a single modal instrument that competitors, host states, and international courts can target with increasing sophistication. This finding qualifies the optimistic reading of managed regional overstretch as a self-correcting system and introduces a countervailing proposition: that the accumulation of recalibration episodes may progressively narrow the UAE's available response repertoire, generating a meta-level overstretch of adaptive capacity that the existing framework does not directly address.

Conclusion

This article has addressed a theoretically generative puzzle: how does a structurally small, resource-constrained state sustain expansive multi-theatre foreign policy activism under conditions of patron dependency

and systemic instability? The answer, developed through a neoclassical realist framework and grounded in longitudinal analysis of UAE engagements in Yemen, Libya, and the Horn of Africa/Red Sea corridor, is that such activism reflects neither structural permissiveness nor unconstrained elite volition. Rather, it follows a cyclical logic – Activation, Expansion, Diffuse Overstretch, Recalibration – driven by the interaction of systemic uncertainty, elite threat perception, and the structural limits inherent in dispersed multi-theatre commitment. Key turning points, the 2019 Yemen drawdown, the 2020 Libyan ceasefire, the 2021 al-Ula normalisation, the 2022 Houthi escalation, and the 2023–2024 Red Sea and Sudan crises, provide evidence consistent with the model's operation across qualitatively distinct strategic contexts, lending it cross-case robustness that single-theatre accounts of Gulf foreign policy cannot provide, while the case-specific caveats noted above indicate that this evidence is preliminary and stronger for Yemen and Libya than for the Horn of Africa.

Collectively, three theoretical contributions emerge. First, the article extends neoclassical realist theory beyond its European great-power origins to small-state activism in the Gulf, demonstrating that elite perception functions as an empirically traceable mediating variable rather than a residual category. Second, it reconceptualises strategic autonomy, traditionally an EU-centric industrial sovereignty concept, as a relational, operationally purposive small-state strategy, distinguished from hedging by its active intent to reshape patron-client hierarchies and from omnibalancing by its outward-projecting ambition rather than domestic regime-survival logic. Third, it extends overstretch theory beyond hegemonic overextension to introduce an analytically productive distinction between concentrated single-theatre overstretch, which generates rapid, visible recalibration pressure, and diffuse multi-domain overstretch, which accumulates more gradually, resists diagnostic salience, and produces delayed, incremental adjustment. It should be emphasised that these are not taxonomic refinements; they generate distinct observable implications for the timing, character, and reversibility of strategic recalibration.

The framework's scope conditions are explicit: managed strategic autonomy obtains where liquid financial reserves, independent logistics infrastructure, a permissive patron environment shaped by great-power competition, and centralised decision-making structures converge. Their absence, as in Oman's deliberate restraint or Bahrain's structural dependency, should suppress the predicted cyclical pattern, offering a scope condition against which the framework's applicability can be assessed in future comparative work. Centralised decision-making is itself

the least stable of these conditions: as noted above, the model's institutional responsiveness is bound to a particular configuration of elite leadership perception under MBZ, and a future transition or diffusion of that authority constitutes a further scope condition on the framework's continued applicability to the UAE case itself, independent of its portability to other states. In this respect, comparative application to Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia represents the immediate research frontier.

The UAE case ultimately demonstrates that small-state activism is neither structurally determined nor strategically unlimited. Drawing on the preceding analysis, managed strategic autonomy captures this dynamic precisely because it treats autonomy as an achievement, overstretch as a structural process, and recalibration as a rational adaptation to accumulated systemic strain, thereby offering IR scholarship a portable, empirically tractable framework for analysing agency-constraint tensions across the Global South.

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