UAE’s Changing Defense Strategies and Security Relationships
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The UAE has experienced multiple transitions in the 2000s including a leadership transition in 2004, state consolidation under Abu Dhabi leadership particularly after the 2008 financial crisis and a growing foreign policy assertiveness following the Obama administration’s force draw down in Iraq, the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Politically, the UAE has worked hand in glove with the U.S.-led forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda during the Global War on Terror, and is working with established allies in the region and the West against violent Islamists such as ISIS. This paper asserts that external threats including the 2003 Iraq War, fears of Iranian hegemonic policies across the Gulf, ongoing uncertainty about GCC cohesion, and internal threats from domestic terrorism and possible civil unrest exacerbated by the Arab Spring have caused the UAE to enhance its range of defense and security relationships. It argues that the UAE will need to continue to prioritize foreign relations with a strong defensive component, including the low profile but vital U.S. - UAE military relationship. Doing so will be crucial to maintaining its state consolidation and economic development trajectory unimpeded, including building up an indigenous arms industry, as it continues to offer youth in the Arab World an alternative state system to admire and possibly adopt.