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## US–China Strategic Competition in the Middle East: Implications for Regional Stability

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### 1. Introduction

The US-China Strategic competition can be described as the worsening of the fight between Washington and Beijing regarding who is to have control of the region and the world and the alliances and construction of the world order. Although the scope of this rivalry is international, the Middle East has been among the most delicate regions due to the fact that it unites the energy reserves, <sup>1</sup>maritime bottlenecks, strategic location, weapons market and political instability that is synonymous. With the United States, the region is crucial because its security structure is long-term, it is partners with allied military forces, it has counterterrorism interests, and they seek to thwart aggressive nations, specifically Iran. To China, the Middle East is crucial since it helps Beijing to achieve its energy security, Belt and Road connectivity, trade growth, and increase in its diplomatic presence. In this respect, the region has ceased to be just a secondary theatre in the great-power rivalry; it has become an important testing-ground on the effects of strategic rivalry on regional stability and order.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. US–China Strategic Competition in Middle East Nature

a) United States approach. United States is only yet to consider security and defense as the primary prerogative in approaching the Middle East. One thing is its strength still remains at the military bases, access of navy, co-operation of intelligence, sale of arms, after commitment of deterrence and alliances of snippets with kings of the Gulf, Israel, Egypt and Jordan. As much as Washington has started to lend priority to the Indo-Pacific as a part and parcel of the comprehensive grand strategy, it has never gone out of the Middle East in an ultimate sense. Instead, the US policy is a propensity to geopolitical centrality and reduced ambition: United States is not willing to put its money into costly overextension yet wants to preserve the role of the primary provider of security. This strategy also includes counterterrorism efforts, as well as an effort to curtail the presence of Iran in the region. The participation of the Americans may,

<sup>1</sup> Walther-Puri, A. M. (2025). Measuring the Impact of US Military Counterterrorism Assistance in Mali (Doctoral dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University)).

Al Shidhani, R., & Baig, S. (2024). Balancing power and prosperity: China's geo-economic engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council. *Asian Review of Political Economy*, 3, Article 20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-024-00040-6>

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therefore, be not as extensive as it has never been, but very decisive in the matter of hard-security.<sup>3</sup>

b) The growing involvement of China. Another model of increasing China interaction in this Middle East is its role. The leverage of Beijing is created primarily based on commerce, infrastructure, interdependence in energy, digital technology, and selective diplomacy as opposed to military binding. The Belt and Road Initiative has inspired China to become more involved in ports and logistics systems, industrial investments, and energy relations in the Gulf and in the Middle East, in general. In the meantime, the Gulf countries have built up their business ties with China despite the fact that they do not get rid of the interdependence within the sphere of security that brings about a two-level system where Washington dominates the military realm, whereas Beijing steps forward in the economic arena. China has also tried to move its financial status to diplomatic irrelevance, with the most conspicuous one being the Saudi rapprochement with Iran that took place in 2023. However, in the new scholarship, the part of China in that rapprochement was significant yet was still rather limited: Beijing became the facilitator of the eventual breakthrough but it did not assume control of the region and turned into the prime security manager of the Gulf. It suggests that China is boosting its power in the region, though not to supplant the United States instead, its power is rising in terms of geo-economics and diplomatic strength.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Implications for Regional Stability

a) Security implications. The US-China rivalry in the Middle East has ambivalent security impacts which tend to be destabilizing. On the one hand, the US military presence and military cooperation still provide a deterring effect and help to prevent the sudden gaps of power in the region. The competition on the other side promotes the diversification of security relationships between state regions, expansion of arm purchases, as well as investment in strategic autonomy.<sup>5</sup> This can result in a more militarized world where states in an uncertainty situation protect themselves by enhancing their own capacities and not depending on joint security agreements. The rise of China is another riddle as Beijing is reaping the fruits of stability within the region and secure energy supply but is reluctant to assume the roles of regional security. This can result in a vacuum: The United States is not so ready to be the watchdog of every crisis as it was in the past, but China is unwilling to replace it yet. A combination of such can lead to disturbance of uncertainty, self-help and miscalculation opportunities in a weak conflict environment in the past.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Castleberry-Hernandez, A. (2023). The US response to China's strategic competition in the Middle East and North Africa. *Orbis*, 67(1), 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2022.12.005>

<sup>4</sup> Beidollahkhani, A. (2025). From predicting dissent to programming power; analyzing AI-driven authoritarian governance in the Middle East through TRIAD framework. *Democratization*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2576527>

<sup>5</sup> Zhang, Y. (2024). Crucial yet limited: China's role in the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 18(3), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2024.2411104>

<sup>6</sup> Chaziza, M. (2024). The US-China rivalry in the Middle East: Confrontation or competitive coexistence. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 11(2), 231–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989241240899>

b) Political implications. Strategic rivalry helps the governments in Middle East to have more maneuvering space, politically. Hedging or multi-alignment is growing into a stable happening in the region: states are conducting relations of defense with Washington and expanding the trade, technology and diplomatic relations with Beijing. The tendency boosts the independence of governments and reduces the reliance of a specific patron. It also provides the alternatives to the Western pressure on democracy, governance and human rights to the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments. Chinese non-interference, state-based, and technological cooperation system can be attractive to the governments wishing to receive external support but not in exchange of political favors. The excess of surveillance technologies and the development of AI-based governance tools only contribute to the development of this fear, as both of them can help to increase the efficiency of their states and, at the same time, lead to the rise of authoritarianism. Therefore, regional elites can have more policy choice as a result of the competition between the US and China although this comes at the cost of reform pressure and further entrenchment of more coercive types of governments.<sup>7</sup>

c) Economic implications. The competition comes with opportunities as well as risks when it comes to the economy. The participation of China has aided in the development of infrastructure, diversification of market, energy partnerships and new trade routes each of which can contribute to economic growth in the region.<sup>8</sup> The relations with China to Gulf states in particular, are much in line with the overall policy of diversification, and short of a monopoly in the Western market. There is however a novel weakness which comes with these advantages. Ports, infrastructure, and digital systems, as well as energy corridors are no longer commercial property and are turned into more strategic property linked to great-power competition.<sup>9</sup> The problem of dependency, foreign leverage and trade and technology politicization. The energy factor also plays a key role: as China is over dependent on the Gulf energy, the Gulf on thriving export grounds, any crisis in the area will become the source of instantaneous blowback to both regional and worldwide economy of the regions and markets. Concisely, the economic aspect of the US-China competition may spur development and interconnectedness, yet it may as well enhance the reliance of strategies and generate new modes of instability in case economic interdependence is securitized.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Future Trajectories and Risks

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<sup>7</sup> Fattah, A. (2026). China's strategic approach to the Persian Gulf: Balancing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. *International Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-025-00746-1>

<sup>8</sup> Mahmood, S., Misra, P., Sun, H., Luqman, A., & Papa, A. (2025). Sustainable infrastructure, energy projects, and economic growth: mediating role of sustainable supply chain management. *Annals of operations research*, 355(1), 1099-1130.

<sup>9</sup> Saleh, A., & Yazdanshenas, Z. (2023). China-Iran strategic partnership and the future of US hegemony in the Persian Gulf Region. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 51(2), 377–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2215188>

<sup>10</sup> Kamrava, M. (2025). Structure, agency, and Persian Gulf security: Continuity amid change. *Comparative Strategy*, 44(1), 115–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2024.2445493>

It is possible to take a number of trajectories into the future. The former and the most likely is the one of managed competition by which the United States has been the central position in security and PRC takes a step forward in development both economically and diplomatically and the countries in the region continue to balance between the two. The second alternative is disintegrated regional order: no actors will provide comprehensive stability: Washington will be more selective, Beijing more careful and the regional powers will be more independent and competitive in their policies. The third way is greater proxy convergence especially in the cases where the crises that surround Iran, Israel, the Red Sea or the security of the Gulf are integrated more into the external conflict. Finally, there is the risk of using a wrong strategic calculation. As the Middle East is already an area characterized by conflicts, even a bit of competition of the US with China can contribute to increasing the degree of instability in the event that such competition can be perceived by local actors as the authorization to be even more aggressive.<sup>11</sup> According to recent sources, it is unlikely that any direct US-China military conflict will take place in the region, but it is a lot more affordable through multi-alignment, proxy warfare and uncertainty of security guarantees.

## 5. Conclusion

The US and Chinese strategic rivalry in the Middle East is not a mere change of hegemony. The United States continues leading the security radiation span whereas China expands quicker in the means of trade, infrastructure, technology and diplomacy. It generates an unequal yet very impactful competition. To the region, it does not just imply that one power will completely take over the other but regional states will still be exploiting the rivalry to gain as much autonomy as possible, diversify their partnerships and hedge against uncertainty. This might offer a window to economically empower the disadvantaged groups and diplomatic freedom but can also increase militarization, promote authoritarianism, destroy local politics and increase the chances that local crises become mixed-up in rivalry among greater powers. Way forward: the most stabilization way forward is regional de-escalation, balanced attention to both powers, greater protection of critical trade and energy routes, and a deliberate effort of the Middle Eastern states to see that external competition does not reduce the region to a realization of zero-sum geopolitics.

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<sup>11</sup> Mahmood, A., & Askari, M. U. (2025). Shifting dynamics of Sino-American competition in multi-aligned Middle East. *Heliyon*, 11(1), e41053. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e41053>