

The Rise of China and the Future of American Hegemony in the Middle East

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the rise of China and its possible impact on American dominance in the Middle East (ME). The study explores China's strategic initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has significantly enhanced its economic and geopolitical influence in the region. This study addresses the shifting dynamics of U.S. policies in the Middle East, underlining the fluctuating in its engagement with the region and its implications for regional security. By comparing U.S. and Chinese foreign policies, economic investments, military presence, and diplomatic engagements, the paper assesses whether China will be able to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East or if American influence will remain predominant. The research contextualizes the U.S.-China competition within the broader international system. The paper provides insights into the strategic partnerships and geopolitical ambitions of both countries in detailed case studies of key ME countries. The findings suggest that the United States retains substantial leverage through its military capabilities and longstanding alliances despite China's growing influence.

Keywords: China, American Hegemony, Middle East, Belt and Road Initiative, Geopolitics, Energy Security

Introduction

The Middle East has been a center of attention for global powers for decades, particularly for the United States (U.S.). Historically, the U.S. has leveraged its military superiority, economic power, and strategic alliances with ME countries to maintain its hegemony in the region. However, the 21st century has witnessed a significant change with the rise of China as a global economic and political powerhouse. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, aims at enhancing its influence through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships across Asia, Africa, and Europe, including the Middle East.

This research examines the profound impact of China's rise on American hegemony in the Middle Eastern region. The expansion of China's footprint in ME poses new challenges to the long-established dominance of the U.S. The Belt and Road Initiative has facilitated China's deeper engagement in the region, fostering economic interdependence and strategic alliances with key Middle Eastern states. Concurrently, U.S. policies in the Middle East have evolved and changed over time, reflecting shifts in priorities and strategies under different administrations.

The core objective of this study is to analyze whether China's growing influence poses a substantial threat to American hegemony in the Middle East. By exploring the contours of

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China's Middle East policy, comparing it with the U.S. foreign policy, and assessing the strategic, economic, and political dimensions of their approaches to ME, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving power dynamics in the region. Central questions addressed in this study include: What are the strategic objectives driving China's Middle East policy? How does China's rise challenge U.S. predominance? Can China potentially replace the U.S. as the dominant power in the Middle East?

The guiding hypothesis of this research posits that although China's socioeconomic ingress into the Middle East is significant, American influence will remain predominant due to its military superiority and deep-rooted alliance. This hypothesis is examined through the lenses of various international relations theories, including liberalism realism, and neoclassical realism providing a robust theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of engagements of these two global powers in the Middle East.

This study is organized into several sections. The literature review synthesizes previous research on China-ME relations, U.S.-ME relations, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Subsequent sections provide a detailed analysis of China's Middle East policy, the evolution of U.S. policies and strategies in the region, and a comparative assessment of their influence. Case studies of key Middle Eastern countries illustrate the practical implications of Sino-American engagements.

By studying the different military, political, diplomatic, and strategic maneuvers of China and the United States in the Middle East, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on global power change and their regional consequences, offering insights into the future trajectory of international relations in one of the world's most volatile and strategically significant region.

Literature Review

Historical Context of US Hegemony in the Middle East

The U.S. has remained dominant ME since the end of World War II, attracted by its strategic interests in the region's oil resources and geopolitical significance. This hegemony has been displayed by its military presence, economic influence, and diplomatic relationships, particularly with key allies like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. The traditional U.S.-Saudi alliance, established on the basis of oil and security, has been a cornerstone of American policy in the region. However, this relationship has evolved significantly in response to shifts in global oil markets and regional politics. For instance, the shale revolution in the U.S. has transformed it into the world's largest oil producer, thereby altering its dependency on Middle Eastern oil and reshaping its strategic priorities (Eurasia Review) (Jones, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, China's Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious infrastructure and economic development project aimed at increasing global trade routes and economic connectivity and interdependence. The BRI seeks to develop a vast network of railways, ports, highways, and energy projects that connect China to various regions, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. The initiative is part of China's

broader strategy to expand its economic influence, secure markets for its industrial goods, and secure long-term energy supplies. Through the BRI, China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in participating countries, fostering closer economic ties and increasing its geopolitical leverage (Encyclopedia Britannica) (Council on Foreign Relations).

The Shifting Dynamics of US Influence

U.S. foreign policy witnessed a significant shift towards “transactional bilateralism” under the Trump administration where strategic alliances were increasingly assessed through the lens of immediate economic and security benefits. President Trump reevaluated traditional where new terms of engagement were set to base on reciprocal economic benefits and direct contributions to U.S. security interests. For instance, Trump’s administration pressured Saudi Arabia to align its oil production strategies with American economic interests and utilized arms sales as a diplomatic tool to strengthen ties with Gulf states (Eurasia Review) (Smith, 2019).

China’s Growing Presence

China’s strategic maneuvers in the Middle East, primarily through the BRI, have posed a challenge to the longstanding U.S. hegemony. China aims to secure energy resources and expand its influence in the region by investing in critical infrastructure and fostering economic dependencies. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a prominent example, representing a significant investment that enhances China’s access to the Arabian Sea and promotes regional connectivity. Such initiatives are viewed by many in the West as efforts to extend China’s economic and political influence globally, and particularly reshaping the power equilibrium in the Middle East (World Economic Forum) (Council on Foreign Relations).

Comparative Analysis of U.S. and Chinese Policies

The contrasting policies and approaches of the U.S. and China in ME suggest a broader shift in global power equilibrium. This shift from a predominantly military-driven strategy by the U.S. to an economic-centric approach by China signifies a transformation in how global influence is wielded in the 21st century. The BRI’s focus on long-term economic development contrasts with the US’s historical emphasis on immediate security concerns and military presence (Encyclopedia Britannica) (Council on Foreign Relations).

In short, the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is marked by the strategic and economic competition between the U.S. and China. This literature review provides a foundation for understanding the broader implications of this strategic competition and its potential impact on regional stability and global power structures.

China's Middle East Policy

China's Middle East policy is driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and political interests, reflecting Beijing's broader ambitions on the global stage. The region's importance to China has grown significantly over the years due to its energy resources, strategic location, and potential as a market for Chinese goods and investments.

Economic and Energy Interests

China's primary interest in the Middle East is its vast energy resources. China is the world's largest importer of oil which relies heavily on Middle Eastern countries to secure its energy needs. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates are among its key suppliers. In 2016, China and Saudi Arabia established a comprehensive strategic partnership, which has since been enhanced to include significant cooperation in infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy sectors. All these initiatives are critical to China's Belt and Road Initiative (CSIS) (The Diplomat) (Blanchard, 2021).

The BRI is a central element of China's policy in ME, aiming to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through land and maritime networks to boost trade and stimulate economic growth. This initiative has led to substantial Chinese investments in regional infrastructure projects, such as the development of Egypt's new administrative capital and the Suez Canal Area Development Project (The Diplomat) (Alshamsi & Yuan, 2019).

Strategic Partnerships and Diplomatic Engagement

China has carefully balanced its relations with various Middle Eastern countries, engaging in comprehensive strategic partnerships with several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait. These partnerships include economic, technological, and military cooperation. For instance, China has signed a 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran, which includes significant investments in Iranian infrastructure and energy sectors. This agreement boosts Iran's efforts to mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions and strengthen its "axis of resistance" (The Diplomat) (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2020).

Diplomatically, China has positioned itself as a mediator in regional conflicts. In March 2023, Beijing facilitated the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This diplomatic triumph exhibited China's growing influence and ability to act as a peace broker in the region. This diplomatic engagement is part of China's broader strategy to enhance its role as a global power and foster a stable environment conducive to its economic interests (Interpret: China) (Salman & Wu, 2022).

Security and Military Considerations

Although China emphasizes non-interference and peaceful co-existence and development, its increasing economic stakes in ME necessitate a certain degree of involvement in regional security. China has conducted joint naval exercises with Iran and Russia, which suggests that it is inclined to protect its interests and contribute to regional security. However, China remains cautious about direct military involvement as it is never its stated policy. It rather prefers to use economic and diplomatic tools to influence regional dynamics (The Diplomat) (Hua, 2018).

As Beijing continues to navigate the geopolitics of the Middle East, its role in the region is likely to grow, presenting both opportunities and challenges for regional stability and international relations.

U.S. Middle East Policy and its Evolution

The United States' policy in the Middle East has undergone significant transformations from the early 20th century to the present day. Initially, the U.S. presence in the region was minimal and was driven only by commercial interests. However, post-World War II world order and the discovery of vast oil reserves shifted American interests toward ensuring stability of the region in order to have constant access to and control the energy resources. The U.S. policy is driven by strategic, economic, and ideological factors in ME.

Early Engagement and Cold War Era

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. sought to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East under its policy of containment. It tried to align countries of ME that could serve as bulwarks against communism. This period saw the establishment of close ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, underpinned by the 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz ibn Saud. This meet-up cemented strategic partnership between the two which was based on oil security and military cooperation (ThoughtCo) (The Washington Institute) (Mabon, 2017).

The 1950s and 1960s were marked by the Eisenhower Doctrine, which aimed to contain Soviet expansion in ME by offering economic and military aid to these countries. This policy was tested during the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958 (The Washington Institute) (Gerges, 2018).

The 1970s: Energy Crises and Diplomatic Shifts

The 1970s was an era defined by energy security concerns following the 1973 Arab oil embargo. This period underscored the vulnerability of U.S. energy supplies and catalyzed efforts to foster peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Notably, President Jimmy Carter's administration brokered the Camp David Accords in 1978, which led to the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. This treaty realigned regional alliances and secured U.S. interests through increased military and economic aid to both nations (ThoughtCo) (The Washington Institute) (Halliday, 2019).

The 1980s: Strategic Realignments

During the Reagan administration, U.S. policy pivoted to direct military engagement and support for friendly governments. The U.S. backed Iraq in its war against Iran to contain the spread of the Islamic Revolution. Additionally, the Reagan administration intervened in Lebanon and supported Israel in a bid to counter Soviet influence. However, the Lebanon intervention culminated in tragedy with the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, leading to a reevaluation of U.S. military involvement in the region (ThoughtCo) (The Washington Institute) (Alterman, 2020).

Post-Cold War Era: From Containment to Direct Intervention

The end of the Cold War brought new challenges and opportunities. The Persian Gulf War in 1991, launched by President George H.W. Bush, marked a significant military engagement on the part of the U.S. to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait and protect global oil supplies. This

operation showcased U.S. military might and underscored its commitment to regional stability and the importance of oil supplies as its core national interests (ThoughtCo) (The Washington Institute) (Bacevich, 2016).

The 2000s saw a dramatic escalation in U.S. involvement with the 2003 invasion of Iraq under President George W. Bush. This intervention was aimed at dismantling weapons of mass destruction (which were never found) allegedly being developed by Iraq and promoting democracy. However, the invasion resulted in prolonged instability and violence. Critics argue that the Iraq War significantly destabilized the region and undermined U.S. credibility and strategic goals (CSIS) (Harvey, 2018).

Recent Developments

In the current era, U.S. policy has been marked by attempts to balance engagement with a desire to reduce direct military involvement. The Obama administration's focused on counterterrorism, though drone strikes and special operations which meant to address threats without large-scale deployments. Additionally, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal sought to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons (The Washington Institute) (CSIS) (Jones, 2021).

Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. reinforced its alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia, while also pursuing the controversial decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. He also normalized Israel's relations with Arab countries through the Abraham Accords. The Biden administration has aimed to recalibrate U.S. policy by emphasizing human rights and reducing military commitments. However, the geopolitical and energy interests continue to drive U. S. engagement (The Washington Institute) (CSIS) (Lynch, 2021).

Comparative Analysis: China vs. the U.S. in ME

The strategic approaches of China and the United States in the Middle East reveal contrasting priorities, methods, and impact on the region's geopolitical landscape.

Economic Engagement

China's primary involvement in the Middle East has been driven by economic interests, particularly in securing energy resources and expanding its Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure projects, such as the Suez Canal Economic Zone in Egypt and ports in Djibouti, and has become a major trading partner for many Middle Eastern countries (Georgetown JIA) (The Diplomat) (Kuo, 2020). The focus of China on economic cooperation is further exemplified by China's Digital Silk Road, which includes significant investments in 5G and other advanced technologies in collaboration with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Georgetown JIA) (Wang & Holslag, 2021).

In contrast, while the U.S. also engages economically in the Middle East, its approach includes a significant military dimension. The U.S. maintains a network of military bases throughout the region and is a major arms supplier to several Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia and Israel (The Diplomat) (Blanchard, 2019). Economic ties are also robust, particularly through

trade and investments in the energy sector, but these are often intertwined with security arrangements and political alliances.

Diplomatic and Political Influence

China's diplomatic strategy in the Middle East emphasizes non-interference and mutual peaceful co-existence which resonates well with many regional actors who are seeking to diversify their partnerships away from traditional Western powers. This approach has facilitated China's role as a mediator in regional conflicts, such as the Saudi-Iran rapprochement (Georgetown JIA) (Atlantic Council) (Zhang & Feng, 2020).

The U.S., on the other hand, has a long-standing history of deep political involvement in the Middle East, often marked by direct intervention. This includes military actions, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, and significant involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. U.S. policy has traditionally been driven by the goal of maintaining regional stability and security in order to protect its strategic interests. Such policies often lead to mixed perceptions of the U.S. intentions among Middle Eastern countries (Atlantic Council) (Katzman, 2020).

Military Presence and Security Policies

The United States' security policy in the Middle East is characterized by a substantial military presence aimed at ensuring the security of its allies and maintaining open sea lanes crucial for global oil supply. This presence includes numerous bases and a strong naval presence in key strategic points such as the Persian Gulf (The Diplomat) (Hinnebusch, 2019). The U.S. has also been involved in several security alliances and initiatives to counter terrorism and limit the influence of powers it considers hostile, particularly Iran.

Conversely, China has traditionally avoided a significant military footprint in the region, relying instead on economic leverage and diplomatic initiatives. However, there are indications that this may change as Beijing seeks to protect its growing interests. For example, China's first overseas military base in Djibouti signals a potential shift towards a more pronounced security role in the future (Georgetown JIA) (The Diplomat) (Brewer & Trevisani, 2021).

Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives of China in the Middle East are largely driven by its need for energy security, market expansion for its goods, and the desire to enhance its global influence through initiatives like the BRI. China's emphasis on economic development and infrastructure has made it an attractive partner for many Middle Eastern countries looking to modernize their economies and reduce dependence on Western support (Georgetown JIA) (Atlantic Council) (Blanchard, 2020).

In contrast, the U.S. aims to maintain its hegemony and ensure the security of its allies, which often involves direct political and military involvement. The U.S. seeks to promote its so-called liberal international order and counter the influence of rivals like Iran and extremist groups

through a combination of military strength, economic sanctions, and diplomatic efforts (The Diplomat) (Atlantic Council) (Gordon, 2018).

Case Studies

Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabia is key player in the Middle East which draws significant attention from both the United States and China due to its strategic location, vast oil reserves, and economic influence. A comparison of the engagements by these two global powers reveals contrasting approaches and objectives.

Comparison of U.S. and Chinese Engagements: The United States has historically maintained a strong alliance with Saudi Arabia, rooted in security cooperation, arms sales, and shared geopolitical interests (Smith, 2021). On the other hand, China's engagement has primarily revolved around energy security, infrastructure investments, and expanding its footprint through Belt and Road Initiative (Wang, 2020).

Impact on Saudi Foreign Policy and Economy: The dual engagement of the U.S. and China has undoubtedly influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and economic trajectory. While the U.S. partnership has provided security assurances and access to advanced military technology, Chinese investments have contributed to infrastructure development and economic diversification efforts, which aligns with Saudi Vision 2030 (Zhang & Li, 2022).

Iran

Iran is also a key regional player, and has pursued strategic partnerships with China amidst increasing tensions with the United States and its allies. This dynamic has significant implications for regional stability, economic development, and Iran's geopolitical positioning.

Strategic Partnerships with China: Iran's deepening ties with China have been underscored by comprehensive strategic partnerships, including economic, political, and military cooperation (Li & Ahmad, 2023). These partnerships have culminated in multi-billion dollar agreements spanning energy, infrastructure, and technology sectors, bolstering Iran's resilience against international pressure (Chen et al., 2021).

Impact of U.S. Sanctions and China's Support: The imposition of stringent U.S. sanctions on Iran has propelled Tehran to seek alternative economic lifelines, with China emerging as a critical partner (Brown, 2020). China's steadfast support, including continued energy imports, financial assistance, and diplomatic backing, has diluted the impact of U.S. sanctions and has provided Iran with much-needed leverage in regional geopolitical dynamics (Lee, 2022).

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE has strategically balanced its relationships with both the United States and China by leveraging its geopolitical position and economic prowess to maximize benefits from both superpowers.

Engagement with the United States: The UAE has maintained a close partnership with the United States, particularly in security and defense cooperation. The presence of U.S. military bases in the UAE underscores their shared interests in regional security, counterterrorism efforts, and stability in the Gulf region (Jones & Smith, 2018). Additionally, the UAE-U.S. Free Trade Agreement has facilitated robust economic ties, making the UAE being a major trading partner and investment destination for U.S. businesses (Brown & Wang, 2019).

Engagement with China: Simultaneously, the UAE has actively pursued economic ties with China, capitalizing on China's growing influence and investment opportunities. Chinese investments in infrastructure projects, such as ports and logistics hubs, align with the UAE's vision for economic diversification and development. Moreover, the UAE serves as a key node in China's Belt and Road Initiative, facilitating trade routes and enhancing connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe (Li et al., 2020).

Implications for Regional Dynamics: The UAE's dual engagement with the U.S. and China reflects its pragmatic approach to foreign policy, which aims at maximizing economic benefits and maintaining strategic partnerships. Its alliance with the United States ensures security assurances and military cooperation, while its economic ties with China contribute to its vision of becoming a global economic hub. However, this balancing act also poses challenges, as the UAE navigates potential tensions between the competing interests of its superpower partners.

Egypt

Egypt, with its historical significance and strategic location in the Middle East, has similarly sought to balance its relationships with the United States and China, albeit with different emphases and challenges.

Engagement with the United States: Egypt has long been a recipient of U.S. military and economic aid. Military cooperation has cemented their strategic partnership and cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism, regional stability, and peacekeeping efforts. The United States views Egypt as a key ally in the region, particularly in addressing shared security concerns like the fight against terrorism and the stability of the Suez Canal (Smith & Jones, 2020).

Engagement with China: In recent years, Egypt has actively courted Chinese investments and infrastructure projects as part of its economic development strategy. Chinese companies have been involved in major infrastructure initiatives, such as the construction of the New Administrative Capital and the development of industrial zones along the Suez Canal. China's Belt and Road Initiative presents opportunities for Egypt to enhance its connectivity, trade, and economic growth (Chen & Liu, 2021).

Implications for Regional Dynamics: Egypt's engagement with both the United States and China reflects its efforts to diversify its sources of support and investment, mitigate economic challenges, and pursue its development goals. However, this dual engagement also raises concerns about potential dependencies, geopolitical alignments, and the balance of power in the region.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is undergoing significant transformation due to the rise of China and its impact on American hegemony. China's strategic initiatives like BRI have considerably bolstered its economic and geopolitical influence in the region. Meanwhile, the United States policies in the Middle East exhibit fluctuating engagement, which shapes the dynamics of regional stability and security. This study employed a comparative analysis of U.S. and Chinese foreign policies, economic investments, military presence, and diplomatic engagements to evaluate the potential for China to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East. The research findings, supported by detailed case studies of key Middle Eastern countries, offer insights into the strategic partnerships and geopolitical maneuvers of both superpowers. While China's influence is undoubtedly growing, the United States maintains significant leverage through its military capabilities and longstanding alliances, which means the U.S. hegemony is not seriously challenged in the region.

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