

Shaping the Political Order of the Middle East: Crisis and Opportunity

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East has undergone a radical transformation since the 2011 Arab uprisings. Arab states have either been severely weakened or have collapsed; territorial boundaries are fragile and no longer impervious amid devastating, far-reaching transnational conflict. Regional actors, who have augmented their military capacity since the war on ISIS started, have reverted to old geopolitical rivalries and inter-state confrontations. Amid this regional contest, a reawakened and resurgent Russia has disrupted what was previously a US enforced and shaped regional security architecture. Russia's resurgence in the Middle East also comes amid an increasingly assertive China. Its global ambitions to challenge the Western-led international order has manifested itself through the inroads Beijing has made into cash-poor Middle East countries through investment and reconstruction packages, within the ambit of its "One Belt One Road" vision. This paper analyses the multiple alliances and conflicts that underpin the region's political and security challenges, looking at how these have enabled opportunity structures for alternative authorities on the ground but also at the international level. It explains how commercial interactions with the Middle East have allowed China to adopt a panoramic, comprehensive strategy for the region, one that has undermined Western influence. It argues this is because Beijing remains an untested power in a region that has a pressing need for Chinese capital inflows but one that has yet to fully comprehend the implications of forging a relationship of dependency on China. While the West has a legacy of conflict in the region and support for autocrats, the US and its European allies have also invested billions of dollars into the promotion of good governance and civil society. Despite resentment toward Western meddling in the region, the US and its allies have established themselves as pioneers of democratic norms and much of the region continue to associate these with the West. The same cannot, and most likely will not, be said about Russia and China in the coming years.

US foreign policy | Middle East | Russia | China

keywords

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Introduction

The Middle East has undergone a radical transformation since the 2011 Arab uprisings. In multiple cases, post-Arab uprising states have either become severely weakened or have collapsed while territorial boundaries are fragile and no longer impervious amid devastating, far-reaching transnational conflicts. Once the exception, proxy warfare has become the norm, exacerbating humanitarian crises in the process and diminishing accountability mechanisms that could otherwise constrain the space for conflict and human rights abuses. Regional actors have augmented their military capacity since the war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) started in 2014 and have reverted to old geopolitical rivalries and interstate confrontations, as manifested by ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and internally within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Moreover, additional layers of tensions and disputes have emerged, as portrayed by Turkey's tensions with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which has, in turn, enabled a critical geostrategic alliance between Turkey and Qatar since the intra-GCC crisis erupted in 2017.

These rivalries and tensions could result in fresh conflagrations amid an ongoing contest to shape the future of the regional order. Saudi Arabia's increasingly assertive and belligerent approach towards Iran, together with Iran's own belligerency and strategic gains across the region, have intensified the battle for the future of the Middle East and the regional order that is emerging from the ruins of conflict in Iraq and Syria. While Iran has become a dominant but still vulnerable power in Iraq and Syria, its Arab rivals have doubled down on their efforts to contain its ascendancy, most notably in Yemen but also by reinforcing their relationship with the US and the expanding of diplomatic channels with Israel. Amid this regional contest, a reawakened and resurgent Russia has disrupted what was previously a US-enforced and -shaped regional security architecture. Russia's

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Paper produced in the framework of the IAI-FEPS project entitled "Europe and Iran in a fast-changing Middle East: Confidence-building measures, security dialogue and regional cooperation", April 2019. Copyright © 2019 Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

resurgence in the Middle East also comes alongside an increasingly assertive China. Its global ambitions to challenge the Western-led international order have manifested through the inroads Beijing has made into cash-poor Middle East countries through investment and reconstruction packages within the ambit of China's "One Belt One Road" vision.

This paper examines the extent to which the Middle East has been and will continue to be shaped by great power rivalries, drawing on the historical supremacy of the US in what has traditionally been regarded as a US (or Western) backyard or area of overwhelming US pre-eminence, to appraise the extent to which this has been challenged by Russia and China. It analyses the multiple alliances and conflicts that underpin the region's political and security challenges, looking at how these have enabled opportunity structures for alternative authorities on the ground but also alternative powers at the international level.

1. The rise and decline of US influence

At the end of World War II, the United States found itself in a position of economic pre-eminence, accounting for 60 per cent of global GDP; its oil and steel production accounted for 70 and 64 per cent of the world total, respectively.¹ US military capacity at that time surpassed that of other Allied powers, as well as the Soviet Union. Its economic, technological and military advancement ushered in a US-shaped and -enforced international order. In the Middle East, the US was not necessarily an uncontested force, rivalled as it was by colonial powers such as the British and the French. However, as was also true for these powers, US influence and engagement with the region was underscored by the necessity of ensuring the free flow of natural resources and the protection of allies to sustain this energy imperative, even deploying the use of force where necessary.

This included intervening after military coups in the 1950s in the context of the rise of Egypt's charismatic, anti-Western Gamal Abdel Nasser, which threatened a region-wide domino effect. In 1958, Iraq's Western-aligned monarchy fell, triggering the deployment of US forces to Beirut to prop up the government of Christian leader Camille Chamoun, while the British sent paratroopers to support King Hussein in Jordan. Iraq, under the monarchy, was the only Arab country to join the Baghdad Pact, which aimed to establish the region's equivalent of NATO to contain Soviet influence amid the fall of Western-enabled monarchies and the ascendancy of Arab socialist factions and movements. Other interventions included Anglo-American support for the infamous 1953 coup d'état in Iran that ousted the democratically elected Mohammed Mosaddeq (who had nationalised

¹ Xue Li and Cheng Zhangxi, "Will China Replace the US Global Role?", in *The Diplomat*, 28 April 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/?p=134192>. See also David Frum, "The Real Story of How America Became an Economic Superpower", in *The Atlantic*, 24 December 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/article/384034>.

Iran's oil industry) and restored the pro-US Reza Shah Pahlavi to power.

For much of the 20th century, US interests in the region were secured through the so-called "Twin Pillars" strategy whereby Iran and Saudi Arabia were empowered and identified as pillars of regional security and beneficiaries of US military equipment – a strategy that was boosted by the rapid increase in oil revenues that followed the 1970s oil boom. After the Arab–Israeli War in October 1973 (Yom Kippur War), US-led efforts to reconcile Israel and its Arab neighbours provided the basis for what has been referred to by Bruce Reidel as a "Pax Americana", centred around Washington's attempts to pull Egypt away from Soviet influence.² The first Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 later heralded the advent of US military expansionism in the region, furthering a presence begun in the 1980s following the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which saw tens of thousands of US troops deployed in the Gulf.³

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, more recent challenges include intra-state conflict, asymmetric warfare and violent extremism in the Middle East, which have largely eclipsed the risk of inter-state conflict and the prospect of a war of ideologies and supremacy between the US and Russia. The instability posed by these threats also has knock-on impacts for the US and its allies in Europe. For example, the complicated civil war and rise of ISIS in Syria has led to massive refugee flows to Europe, exacerbating the domestic economic, political and security issues facing European states. These threats have maintained US military deployments in the region, even if there has been substantial distaste toward US interventionism as a result of domestic aversion to major military engagement in the Middle East following the Iraq war of 2003.

Even under the conflict-averse former US president Barack Obama, the US carried out more drone strikes in the then president's first year than former President George W. Bush carried out during his entire presidency, including a total of 563 strikes.⁴ The US now has approximately 50,000 troops in the Middle East, including troops in key Arab Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, in addition to a sizeable infrastructure of sophisticated, technologically superior fighter planes, surveillance aircraft and unmanned drones.⁵

² Bruce Jones (ed.), *The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region*, Washington, Brookings Institution, January 2019, <https://brook.gs/2FdR330>.

³ Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East. An Appraisal", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, October 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/37843>.

⁴ Jessica Purkiss and Jack Serle, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush", in *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 17 January 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>.

⁵ Heritage Foundation, "Middle East", in *Global Operating Environment. 2019 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, October 2018, p. 153-171, <https://www.heritage.org/node/7757425>. Qatar, for example hosts the biggest US military base in the region, while the US 5th Fleet is stationed in Bahrain.

2. The breakdown of the old order

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Syrian civil war and the emergence of ISIS, the future of Arab statehood in the Middle East has taken an uncertain turn. The Arab state system has been engulfed by crisis and tested like never before in its modern history. As institutions declined or collapsed in the run-up to and during the course of political tumult and conflict, so too did the relationship between citizen and state, resulting in the emergence of powerful sub-state actors who have capitalised on socio-economic grievances, the breakdown in security and the collapse of political and institutional orders.

The decline of the Arab state shifted power away from those who had traditionally wielded it, the political and military elites that historically suppressed challenges to the state from dissidents and rebel groups, using both persecution and coercion. Armed non-state actors, at times enabled and empowered by these same state actors, thus emerged as important wielders of authority and have since exacerbated and exploited ethnic and sectarian divisions to produce far-reaching, bloody and transnational conflicts that have destroyed the fabric of societies across the region.

In 2014, ISIS even declared the end of the nation-state system established a century earlier from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire by the colonial powers, France and Britain. For more than three years, despite the sustained efforts of global powers and their allies to contain and defeat it, this ragtag force established and managed its own proto-state and rendered meaningless the once unshakeable, sacrosanct borders of Syria and Iraq.

During the same period, Shiite militia groups in Iraq organised into the umbrella militia organisation known as the Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). Its 100,000 strong fighters filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the US-trained Iraqi army after ISIS seized Mosul in June 2014. In both Iraq and Syria, but also other countries like Libya and Yemen, armed non-state actors have supplanted the state in the provision of services and security, in partnership with other grassroots actors such as tribes, civil society and clerics. In each of these countries, it is irregular militia groups that have undertaken the fighting, be it in the war against ISIS or intra-state conflict between different factional groups, sometimes on the basis of ethnicity or sect. This includes the PMUs that fought on the frontlines of the war against ISIS in Iraq, or the tens of thousands of militia personnel mobilised by Iran who have fought alongside the Assad regime and, conversely, the tens of thousands of rebel fighters who have sought the fall of the Assad regime with outside support from the GCC and Turkey.

These actors have traditionally been defined as non-state or anti-state. However, they are becoming the state. Local, grassroots actors have been critical to ensuring the survival of national identities and the resilience of their state's borders. They have transitioned from grassroots actors that wield support and legitimacy at the local level to actors that can decisively shape politics and power at the national level.

It is still unclear what form of state will emerge in the conflict-ridden countries of the Arab world. Local and national actors will grapple over power, resources and post-conflict power-sharing. Armed groups that end up integrating into the state will aim to reconfigure the state according to their own ideologies and worldviews. Since there are no longer clear divides between state and non-state actors, and because the state will continue to be weak, armed groups that do not integrate into state institutions will continue to weaponise state resources, identity and sovereignty.

Fundamentally, the contestation over the state is unfolding in radically transformed military theatres. While it was once the exception, it is now the norm for states to outsource security to unaccountable proxies that are far less, if at all, constrained by the laws and norms of the international system. Since the multiple civil wars in the region first began, transnational networks have expanded, as have shared inter-state rivalries and the availability of capable armed groups looking for willing patrons. Syria's civil war may have produced winners in Iran and its allies, and losers in the Arab world and the West, but that does not mean the end of the contestation. Regional actors, who have augmented their military capacity since the war on ISIS almost five years ago, are reverting to old geopolitical rivalries and inter-state confrontations could result in a fresh conflagration.

2.1 Russia's moment?

Amid the recently emerged politics of conflict, intra-state wars and the collapse or weakening of state institutions, alongside the weakening or demolition of the old regional order of grand authoritarian bargains reinforced by Western actors, opportunity structures have enabled alternative powers to either contest or replace the US as the preeminent force in the region. Since Russia's 2015 intervention (with the help of Iran) in Syria reversed the course of the war there in favour of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has asserted itself as a credible alternative to the US through arms sales, economic deals and diplomatic manoeuvring. For example, Saudi Arabia's King Salman travelled to Moscow in October 2017, the first ever visit by a Saudi king, which resulted in more than 15 cooperation agreements worth billions of dollars.⁶ Similarly, with Russian influence in Syria on the rise and the US commitment to staying the course in the country's north-east wavering, Israel has sought Russia's support to curtail Iranian influence in the country.

Russia has attempted to keep and possibly expand its reach in the region since the 1970s, when the US managed to pull Egypt out of Soviet influence and place it squarely into the Western camp. But it is only in the last 15 years that Russia's economic revival and reinvigorated foreign policy assertiveness in a region that has otherwise been considered a US backyard has seen it exploit and capitalise on geopolitical and economic openings. After the Obama administration suspended

⁶ Patrick Wintour, "Saudi King's Visit to Russia Heralds Shift in Global Power Structures", in *The Guardian*, 5 October 2017, <https://gu.com/p/7b7fj>.

some arms sales to Egypt in 2014 over human rights abuses, Russia stepped in to sell fighter jets and attack helicopters.⁷ Similarly, in Iraqi Kurdistan, a longstanding and staunch US-aligned region, Russia has capitalised on the void that has resulted from US disengagement with Iraq but also the decline in US–Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) relations, most notably since the US refused to back the KRG-promoted independence referendum in September 2017 and failed to oppose Baghdad’s military deployment against Kurdish Peshmerga forces.⁸

Just days before the Kurdish independence referendum, Russia’s energy giant Rosneft took ownership of Kurdistan’s oil export pipelines to Turkey, in return for 1.8 billion US dollars, despite objections from Baghdad.⁹ The deal effectively cemented Russia’s political influence in Iraq, if not the region as a whole. In Libya, Russian military officials have established a close relationship with Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. At the same time, Moscow has signed oil agreements with the UN-backed rival government in Tripoli, whereby Russia could position itself as a critical arbiter of peace between the country’s competing factions.¹⁰ Libya could, therefore, empower Russia’s negotiating hand against the West, not least since a standoff and instability in Libya could allow Russia to use mass migration from Libya as leverage against Europe.

In other words, in the span of less than a decade, the Middle East has gone from a region in which the United States was overwhelmingly predominant to one in which Russia is viably positioned to contest US power. In addition to its status recognition since the Syria conflict erupted, Russia has seen its geostrategic gains matched by its soft power projection. For example, government mouthpiece broadcaster Russia Today has an Arabic service which ranks as one of the three largest networks in the Middle East, along with Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera. Since 2009, the channel has grown 26-fold, attracting an average of 6.3 million users per month. In Morocco, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Jordan, Russia Today is watched by 6.7 million people, while its overall audience in the Middle East, North Africa and Arab diasporas in Europe, according to its own sources, spans more than 350 million viewers.¹¹

Of course, the US continues to enjoy unrivalled military prowess and its presence is almost always amplified by its sizeable, unrivalled and uncontested military infrastructure in the region. In Syria, for example, despite having only 2,000 troops

⁷ Oren Dorell, “Russia Offers Egypt No-Strings-Attached Arms Deal”, in *USA Today*, 13 February 2014, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/02/13/russia-egypt-arms-deal/5459563>.

⁸ Maher Chmaytelli and Raya Jalabi, “Iraqi Forces Complete Kirkuk Province Takeover after Clashes with Kurds”, in *Reuters*, 20 October 2017, <https://reut.rs/2yGk5En>.

⁹ Dmitry Zhdannikov, “The Great Russian Oil Game in Iraqi Kurdistan”, in *Reuters*, 19 April 2018, <https://reut.rs/2qIdy7k>.

¹⁰ Boriz Zilberman and Romany Shaker, “Russia and Egypt Are Growing Closer”, in *The American Interest*, 6 June 2018, <https://wp.me/p4ja0Z-L8n>.

¹¹ Maxim A. Suchkov, “Russia Turns to Soft Power in the Middle East”, in *Al-Monitor*, 24 April 2015, <http://almon.co/2f2u>.

and a limited presence in the skies, the US has controlled and protected territories in the east that have long been coveted by its rivals, including Russia. Regime-aligned forces learned this the hard way in February 2018, when 500 pro-regime forces – including Russian mercenaries – attacked US forces but were then met with US warplanes, including Reaper drones, F-22 stealth fighter jets, F-15E Strike Fighters, B-52 bombers, AC-130 gunships and AH-64 Apache helicopters. In the end, 200 to 300 of the pro-regime fighters were killed.¹²

Perceptions matter, however. The US may enjoy economic, technological and military supremacy, but Russia has burnished its credentials as a decisive actor, one that stands by its allies and delivers on what it sets out to achieve. In the case of Syria, Russia has secured Assad's survival, while in Iraq it has brazenly ignored objections from Baghdad over the pipeline agreement with the KRG. Russia does have a military strategy for the region but it is primarily focused on the Mediterranean according to observers, who also consider Moscow's engagements in the Middle East as being ad-hoc and opportunistic.¹³ Syria's geostrategic position provides an entry into the region and access to the Mediterranean – it is Moscow's most important foothold in the Arab world and its closest ally, an alliance with roots in the Soviet era when Hafez al-Assad signed a series of bilateral treaties with Moscow after taking power through a military coup in 1970. Russia's naval facility in Tartus is its only naval foothold in the Mediterranean and was expanded in 2017 following a deal with the Syrian regime, which also granted Russian warships access to Syrian waters.¹⁴

2.2 China's growing visibility

China engages the Middle East with little historical baggage and does not have the colonial legacy and footprint of the West and Russia. During the 1970s, Beijing did back Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which embraced Maoist revolutionary ideology and received military support from Beijing. This relationship saw the PLO establish an embassy in Beijing in 1974 and China's recognition of the self-declared independent state of Palestine in 1988. In recent years, Beijing has backed motions that condemn the Israeli occupation. In 2012 it supported Palestine's bid to become a UN non-member observer state and it has also pressured Israel to unconditionally implement UN resolutions demanding Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories.¹⁵

¹² Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria", in *The New York Times*, 24 May 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2GMKOj0>.

¹³ Liz Sly, "In the Middle East, Russia Is Back", in *The Washington Post*, 5 December 2018, <https://wapo.st/2GbOnEL>.

¹⁴ "Russia Establishing Permanent Presence at Its Syrian Bases: RIA", in *Reuters*, 26 December 2017, <https://reut.rs/2lbzBju>.

¹⁵ Samuel Ramani, "Why Palestine Supports China on the South China Sea", in *The Diplomat*, 26 July 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/?p=90127>.

However, Beijing has also bolstered its ties with Israel, causing some concern in the US.¹⁶ After exchanging diplomatic missions in 1992, Chinese investments in Israel grew exponentially, from 50 million US dollars in the 1990s to 16.5 billion in 2016.¹⁷ Economic relations revolve around technological innovation and the “Red-Med” Railway, a regional network of sea and rail infrastructure that aims to connect China with Europe via Asia and the Middle East. The railway would also link the two Israeli ports of Eilat and Ashdod.¹⁸ Shanghai International Port Group (44 per cent owned by the Chinese government) also won a 2015 government tender to operate a new port in Haifa for 25 years, despite US objections and concerns over its security implications.¹⁹

It is not only economics and trade that have strengthened the Middle East-China nexus. Public opinion polls portray a decline of US standing in the region since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, including in US-aligned countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco. In a 2006 Arab public opinion survey, 78 per cent of respondents listed their views of the US as either somewhat or very unfavourable.²⁰ Conversely, the same poll shows favourable sentiments toward China, which came second behind France as the country that would be welcomed as the world’s only superpower.²¹ Similarly, in a 2008 poll 40 per cent of participants approved of China’s performance as a world leader compared with 17 per cent who approved of the US.²²

China’s economic success and rise as an alternative to the US in the region is increasingly featured in Arab intellectual discourse, to the extent where it has in some quarters been embraced as an alternative to the US model since “its historical and social traditions resemble the Middle East’s more closely”.²³ Beijing’s soft power has been amplified by growing educational and cultural links. For example, 1,500 Egyptian college students study Chinese annually, while Al-Azhar hosts 200 students of Chinese origin.²⁴ In Saudi Arabia, Chinese companies offer scholarships

¹⁶ Osnat Nir, “Israeli Officials Discount U.S. Concerns Over China: ‘The Security Warnings Are a Joke’”, in *Haaretz*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/israeli-officials-discount-u-s-concerns-over-china-the-security-warnings-are-a-jo-1.6850841>.

¹⁷ Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo, “Will China Abandon the Palestinians?”, in *Al Jazeera*, 23 October 2018, <http://aje.io/k5hzj>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Osnat Nir, “Israeli Officials Discount U.S. Concerns Over China”, cit.

²⁰ Shibley Telhami, *2006 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey. A Six Country Study: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia (KSA) and UAE*, presentation, Washington, 8 February 2007, <http://web.archive.org/web/20120531062655/http://www.brookings.edu/views/speeches/telhami20070208.pdf>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Julie Ray, “China’s Leadership Better Regarded Outside the West”, in *Gallup News*, 29 April 2008, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/106858/Chinas-Leadership-Better-Regarded-Outside-West.aspx>; and “U.S. Leadership Approval Lowest in Europe, Mideast”, in *Gallup News*, 2 April 2008, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/105967/us-leadership-approval-lowest-europe-mideast.aspx>.

²³ Jon B. Alterman, “China’s Soft Power in the Middle East”, in Carola McGiffert, ed., *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2009, p. 72, <https://www.csis.org/node/27046>.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

to Saudi citizens to study in China.²⁵

While the US has intervened proactively in the region, both militarily and politically, to bolster friendly governments, selectively promote democratic and pro-market reforms, and counter threats to US interests, Beijing has striven to secure cordial, “baggage free” relations across the region. China has found openings to assert its presence in a region where it has never constituted a traditional power. China’s exponential economic growth saw its turnover of contracted projects along the New Silk Road almost double from 30 billion US dollars to 57 billion between 2008 and 2014, prompting concerns over its “offensive mercantilism” and global “One Belt” vision.²⁶

This growth has resulted in greater Chinese involvement in a region that provides a critical source of energy. China is currently among the top three importers from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.²⁷ The energy imperative that underscores Chinese engagement with the region is crystallising its relations into strategic alliances, as opposed to transactional relationships. Following King Salman’s March 2017 state visit to Beijing, more than 65 billion US dollars of bilateral agreements in the oil, space and renewable energy sectors were signed. China is also competing with the US and Russia in Egypt, where it has forged a new Suez Canal cooperation zone.²⁸ In Oman, Chinese capital inflows transformed a backwater fishing village into a 10.7 billion US dollar “Sino-Oman Industrial City” featuring an oil refinery capable of processing 235,000 barrels per day.²⁹

Iran is China’s top trading partner in the region, a relationship that exceeded 37 billion US dollars in 2017 and one that has deepened further since the US unilaterally ceased implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, and re-imposed sanctions on Tehran. Chinese state-owned investment arm CITIC Group, for example, established a 10 billion US dollar credit line for Iran after the US withdrew from the agreement, despite the threat of new sanctions putting all foreign companies under growing pressure to scale down their presence in the country. That could, however, present complications if relations between Iran and Israel deteriorate further and result in a direct military confrontation. Indeed, the growing Beijing–Tehran relationship has prompted Israel to seek out China’s support for its attempts to curtail Iran’s nuclear ambitions, in addition to Chinese support for Israeli efforts to suppress Iran’s regional proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jonathan Holslag, “How China’s New Silk Road Threatens European Trade”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2017), p. 57-58, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/7490>.

²⁷ Daniel Kliman and Abigail Grace, “China Smells Opportunity in the Middle East’s Crisis”, in *Foreign Policy*, 14 June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/14/china-smells-opportunity-in-the-middle-east-crisis>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Militarily, China and Iran have conducted joint naval exercises on the fringe of the Strait of Hormuz. Beijing has in the past dispatched naval forces to protect trade routes and to evacuate citizens caught in regional strife, most notably in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015 when China evacuated 225 foreign nationals and almost 600 Chinese citizens from Yemen's southern port of Aden, the first time its military had rescued Chinese nationals in a conflict zone.³⁰ Continued investment in port infrastructure (the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb strait the Suez Canal, Haifa), and therefore strategic chokepoints, could eventually see China seek military access in the region, as it has notably done in Djibouti, where a Chinese military base has been established.

Conclusion

The Middle East continues to be a strategically critical landscape in an increasingly inter-connected, globalised world order. It contains more than half of the world's oil reserves, abundant hydrocarbons such as natural gas and is rich in minerals. While the US has become energy independent, it still has a vested interest in protecting energy flows in a region that is vital to the global economy but also to its allies. A disruption to regional geoeconomics or attempts by US rivals to dominate the regional energy landscape could have detrimental consequences for Washington's allies.

Russia and China have both made substantial inroads into what has traditionally been portrayed as a US (or Western) backyard. However, the US still retains an expansive military infrastructure, affording it a wide-ranging and technologically superior presence that its antagonists cannot rival or contest. Russia and China have burnished their credentials amid US disengagement from the region and popular resentment toward Western expenditures that have failed to yield dividends. But Russia and China have yet to establish themselves as credible alternatives, despite their growing assertiveness. That may be because of the ongoing, expansive US military infrastructure in the region, as well as the dominance of Western soft power projections, but it could also simply be an issue of time; the region has had limited social and cultural interactions with Russia and China but the current trajectory suggests this could change in the coming years, assuming Moscow and Beijing remain committed to ongoing geostrategic investment.

Indeed, geopolitics can be disruptive. The staying power of the two countries will become apparent only when Russian and Chinese engagements are tested by conflict and volatile politics. Purely commercial interactions with the Middle

³⁰ "Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden", in *BBC News*, 3 April 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32173811>. Nine hundred Chinese citizens were also evacuated in Libya when fighting broke out in Tripoli in 2014. See, "Hundreds of Chinese Workers Are Evacuated from Libya", in *BBC News*, 7 August 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28684555>.

East may on the surface empower Beijing and allow it to adopt a panoramic, comprehensive strategy for the region, one that enables it to foster ties with both Israel and Iran for example without suffering any blowback. However, that is arguably because China remains an untested power that has not yet been in the Middle East long enough for it to suffer pushback from a region that has a pressing need for Chinese capital inflows and that has yet to fully comprehend the implications of forging a relationship of dependency on Beijing. Indeed, the Israel–Iran crisis may yet become China’s first major test as a preeminent player in the Middle East, since a direct confrontation could undermine its regional interests and objectives. Moreover, China’s internment camps for Muslims and the forced deportation of Uighurs in the Arab world, initiated at the request of the Chinese government, could have implications for Beijing’s relationship with the region and undermine its efforts to match the soft power projection of its Western rivals.³¹

While the West has a legacy of conflict in the region and support for autocrats, the US and its European allies have, conversely, also invested billions of dollars into the promotion of norms, good governance and civil society. Despite resentment toward Western meddling in the region, the US and its allies have established themselves as top-down and bottom-up partners, pioneering values and democratic norms that the region has come to associate them with. The same cannot, and most likely will not, be said about Russia and China in the coming years, which could prove to be a disadvantage for the two countries if grassroots demands for reform and democratic values once again become powerful mobilising forces as they were in 2011.

That said, Russia and China are likely to complement and supplement each other’s efforts to consolidate their presence in the region. Russia has arguably established itself, for now, as the region’s principal arbiter, while China has become the largest investor in the region. The two countries are helped by antipathy toward the US in the region and what could plausibly be interpreted as the desire among both ruling elites and the street for an alternative to US dominance, which has been reinforced by the current US administration’s mixed messaging and inconsistent policy making. Moreover, while the US may have unparalleled capabilities in the region, as some have pointed out, the perception of US decline in the Middle East is less about its capabilities than about its policy choices and its inability to translate capabilities into outcomes.³²

Updated 11 April 2019

³¹ Nour Youssef, “Egyptian Police Detain Uighurs and Deport Them to China”, in *The New York Times*, 6 July 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2uQfDhn>.

³² Marc Lynch, “Does the Decline of U.S. Power Matter for the Middle East?”, in *Monkey Cage*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/19/does-decline-us-power-matter-middle-east>.

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