

# The Sino-American Rivalry and Arabian Gulf Security

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**Abstract:** Over the decades, Middle Eastern security has been influenced by both strong regional and global security interdependence. Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has played a leading security role in the region, providing an extended nuclear umbrella for its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council organization. However, the U.S. strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region and China's rising profile as a global power has set the Middle East's security dynamics again into flux. This article employs a regional security complex framework, paired with a realist theoretical lens, to analyze how the growing Sino-American rivalry is affecting Arabian Gulf security by identifying the regional interests of these two powers and examining the emerging regional security dynamics.

*Keywords:* Balance of interest; geopolitical competition; Arabian Gulf; regional security.

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## Introduction

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the United States has played a leading role in Middle Eastern affairs, serving as the ultimate security guarantor for many Gulf nations. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Washington further raised its regional profile by shifting the bulk of its strategic resources and attention to a global war on terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the waning days of the Obama administration, the United States sought to play a more balanced role among the region's rival powers after more than a decade of endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington's quest for a new military and political role coincided with Beijing's deeper involvement in the Middle East as it emerged largely intact from the 2008 global financial crisis and maintained rapid economic growth up until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in late 2019. Since 2011, the Middle East's strategic importance to Washington has been progressively deprioritized as a United States on the cusp of energy self-sufficiency has completed its most fundamental strategic shift since the end of the Second War, planning and preparing for a prolonged period of competition with China, a peer competitor deemed to have both the intention and capability to subvert the U.S.-led liberal order. In contrast, the region's vast natural resources and economic growth have increasingly led China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to expand its strategic partnerships with all the competing powers in the Middle East. For Washington, containing China's ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region requires undercutting the economic foundations of its military power.<sup>2</sup> The United States is seeking to minimize China's partnerships in the Middle East as a whole and the oil-rich Gulf in particular. At the same time, the intensifying Sino-American rivalry will also create more opportunities for regional powers to maneuver politically.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the regional dynamics resulting from the shifting global distribution of power is, therefore, imperative. This paper seeks to

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<sup>1</sup>John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/03/an-unnecessary-war-2/>.

<sup>2</sup>John Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7–50.

address a consequential question for all Middle Eastern stakeholders: how does the growing Sino-American rivalry affect the Arabian Gulf security?

To answer this question, the authors adopt a regional security complex framework for analysis centered around resident actors in the Arabian Gulf also involving other major powers like Turkey and Israel. While this regional security complex framework focuses primarily on the regional level of analysis, it does not neglect the impact of global power dynamics on the regional security landscape. As Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver argue, “regional patterns of conflict shape the lines of intervention by global level powers ... the expectation is that outside powers will be drawn into a region along the lines of rivalry existing within it. In this way, regional patterns of rivalry may line up with, and be reinforced by, global power ones.”<sup>4</sup> Within the Middle East, the Arabian Gulf has emerged as a pivotal region thanks to its geographic location and vast energy reserves.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, the Arabian Gulf refers to an area consisting of the Gulf Cooperation Council members and other major stakeholders, namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, and Iran.

This paper begins with an assessment of the global outlook of the two great powers. The following section identifies the interests of these two powers in the Middle East. Then, the authors analyze the emerging regional dynamics from a balance-of-power perspective, examining resident powers’ security interests and strategic postures in a shifting landscape.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Stephen Walt, “China Wants a ‘Rules-Based International Order,’ Too,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/>.

<sup>4</sup>Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup>Fatemeh Shayan, *Security in the Arabian Gulf Region* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 3–43; and Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107.

## Superpowers' Global Security Outlook

Contrary to the expectations of many scholars, the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of the U.S.-led liberal international order did not mark the end of great power politics and geopolitical competition.<sup>7</sup> In recent years China and Russia are assertively pursuing their strategic interests and challenging American primacy. Beijing's economic and military power has grown significantly over the decades, leading many political analysts to argue that the structure of the international system is on the verge of a fundamental transformation.<sup>8</sup> John Mearsheimer argues that the international system is being organized into two "thick" bounded orders — one led by the United States and the other by China — defined by heightened security competition and a "thin" international order which will help manage arms controls and economic stability.<sup>9</sup>

Predictions of a renewed geopolitical competition have been echoed in several U.S. strategy documents.<sup>10</sup> The outcome of stiff competition between Washington and Beijing in the Asia-Pacific will determine America's global standing in the decades ahead. This implies a shift in Washington's geostrategic priorities from the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific. This policy reorientation was evident in the Trump administration's *National Security Strategy* which identified China as a revisionist power that "seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor."<sup>11</sup> The Biden administration has embraced a similar strategic outlook and its *National Security Strategic* has labeled China as its main competitor that

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<sup>7</sup>Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18.

<sup>8</sup>Wu Xinbo, "China in Search of a Liberal Partnership International Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (September 2018), pp. 995–1018.

<sup>9</sup>Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail."

<sup>10</sup>Ronald O'Rourke, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense — Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021).

<sup>11</sup>White House, *National Security Strategy of The United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2017), p. 25, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

poses a fundamental threat to the U.S.-led liberal order.<sup>12</sup> To address this challenge, the administration highlights the need to “promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the U.S. and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions.”<sup>13</sup>

China, for its part, has been vigorously implementing a “Going Global” policy that seeks to expand its influence in Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> Initially, its strategic objectives focused on securing raw materials and energy resources to sustain its economic growth. Since Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, China has shown increasing assertiveness and played an active role on the world stage. President Xi believes in the necessity of adopting a “striving for achievement” diplomacy over former leader Deng Xiaoping’s “hide and bide diplomacy.”<sup>15</sup> In recent years, China has begun to seek a systemic change in the structure of the global economy without engaging in a direct confrontation with the United States. For instance, in 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a comprehensive and high-profile program to expand the reach and influence of China’s economy.<sup>16</sup> Beijing’s *White Paper on International Development Cooperation in the New Era* emphasizes the BRI’s role as a platform for China’s global commercial activity, highlighting “South–South” development cooperation as a priority of China’s foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer argues

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<sup>12</sup>White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2022), p. 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2021), p. 9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>David Shambaugh “China’s Long March to Global Power,” in David Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1–21.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>16</sup>Barry Naughton, “China’s Global Economic Interactions,” in David Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 113–136.

<sup>17</sup>“China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era,” State Council of the People’s Republic of China, January 10, 2021, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content\\_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html).

that the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) not only boost Beijing's economic growth, but ultimately aim to project its military and political power globally.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, these initiatives are a central part of a strategy aiming to build a new center of globalization located in Beijing.<sup>19</sup>

In an explicit response to the BRI, Washington has devoted considerable efforts to undermining China's ambitions by urging its allies and partners to reject the initiative. More recently, G-7 leaders adopted the "Build Back Better World" (B3W) initiative, "a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership," aimed at supporting low- and middle-income countries in building better infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in September 2021, the European Commission announced its new global communication strategy, "Global Gateway," which promises to offer a credible, better alternative to the BRI.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, at the recent U.S.-organized Summit for Democracy, more than 100 democracies gathered, including Iraq and Israel, to reaffirm their commitment to democracy and denounce autocracy. In this summit, President Biden unveiled the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal to promote democratic resilience and human rights globally.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, it is foreseeable that Washington and its allies will increasingly pressure Middle Eastern states to reduce or eliminate their reliance on China's BRI.

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<sup>18</sup>John Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No.4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7–50.

<sup>19</sup>Maximilian Mayer, "China's Rise as Eurasian Power: The Revival of the Silk Road and Its Consequences," in Maximilian Mayer, ed., *Rethinking the Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Emerging Eurasian Relations* (Singapore: Springer, 2018), pp. 1–42.

<sup>20</sup>Briefing Room, "Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership," White House, June 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.

<sup>21</sup>European Commission, *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen*, September 15, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_21\\_4701](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_4701).

<sup>22</sup>Joseph Biden, "Remarks By President Biden At The Summit For Democracy Opening Session," White House, December 9, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/09/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-summit-for-democracy-opening-session/>.

## Sino-American Outlook for the Middle East

America's Middle East policy since the end of the Second World War has been based on three pillars: (1) to secure safe and cheap sources of energy for Western economies, (2) to ensure Israel's security, and (3) to promote anti-communism.<sup>23</sup> But in recent decades, some aspects of this triad have lost their relevance. For example, due to the U.S. shale oil boom, the emphasis on crude oil supplies from the Middle East has waned.<sup>24</sup> In fact, by 2020, America had become the largest oil-producing country in the world, with a production rate of more than 19 million barrels per day (b/d), with exports of more than 8 million b/d.<sup>25</sup> Since 2010, its crude oil imports from the Arabian Gulf and OPEC have declined from nearly 48 percent of its total imports to 14 percent. However, most U.S. national security strategies since 1991 have emphasized America's unwavering commitment to Israel's security. As Mearsheimer and Walt argue, since the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, many of America's Middle Eastern policies have centered around its commitment to the security of the Jewish state.<sup>26</sup> The demise of the Cold War also changed America's outlook toward the region. As Andrew Bacevich suggests, since the 1980s, America's active involvement in the Middle East has sought to "reassure, warn, intimidate, suppress, pacify, rescue, liberate, eliminate, transform, and overawe."<sup>27</sup>

Until the early 2010s, American determination and capabilities were the decisive factors in maintaining American primacy in the region. Over

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<sup>23</sup>Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers* and Michael Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy toward the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (1996), pp. 329–343.

<sup>24</sup>Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, and Naser Al-Tamimi, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 21, 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/).

<sup>25</sup>"Oil and Petroleum Products Explained: Oil Imports and Exports," Energy Information Administration, June 2, 2021, <https://wwwdev.eia.gov/global/scripts/jquery/high-charts/exporting-server/index.php>.

<sup>26</sup>John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>27</sup>Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), p. 361.

the years, successive U.S. administrations reflected an unparalleled ability to bear the financial, social, and political costs of maintaining American primacy when it came to protecting their vital interests.<sup>28</sup> However, since then, the U.S. unbridled commitment to the region appears to be declining. Conflicts with adversaries in the Middle East no longer pose a vital threat to American social life, economic influence, and political institutions. Given its distinctive geography, neither a nuclear-armed Iran nor radical Islamic terrorism can overcome the barrier of distance and disrupt the prosperity and security of the American homeland. Consequently, “the U.S. is gradually removing itself from the Middle East landscape due to lack of will rather than material capacity.”<sup>29</sup> This reduction in commitment does not imply abandoning the region completely. Rather, while Washington’s off-shore balancing strategy will limit American interventionism, a major attack on American interests and the collapse or re-organization of regional order will again compel U.S. direct involvement.<sup>30</sup>

This policy reorientation is discernible in the Biden administration’s policy aimed at promoting American interests through the restoration of diplomacy as a practical approach to confronting and absorbing the accelerating developments in the region while moving away from engaging in forever wars. Washington’s concerns are therefore centered primarily around ensuring Israel’s security and its integration with its neighbors, addressing humanitarian issues, countering the influence of rival Great Powers (i.e., China and Russia), disrupting terrorist networks, deterring Iranian aggression, and enforcing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), which will serve to maintain security and stability in the region. This rationale was also articulated by two prominent members of the Biden administration in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, in which Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan argued that America’s traditional hard power strategy of onshore balancing in the Middle East

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<sup>28</sup>Sean Yom, “U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Logic of Hegemonic Retreat,” *Global Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2020), pp. 75–83.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*



has not been successful.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, they propose a less ambitious military strategy and a more ambitious diplomatic strategy for the Middle East.

Given the circumstances, politics and power relationships in the region are currently being shaped by a trend that began during the Obama administration and has been adopted by the subsequent administrations. Even if U.S. diplomatic influence remains influential, it may not be as effective as its military power. As American engagement decreases in the Middle East, regional powers, as well as external powers, will endeavor to fill the power vacuum, either by increasing their self-reliance or forming new and complex geostrategic alliances.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas Washington has deprioritized the Middle East in its strategic planning, Beijing is raising its profile in the region by forging closer ties with major stakeholders.

Considering the multiple political and strategic dynamics emerging in the Middle East, U.S. policymakers will seek to create a new favorable regional balance of power, replacing the old one that foundered after the invasion of Iraq. The new balance of power that the Obama administration sought to establish neither necessarily meant ending the relationship with Saudi Arabia, nor tempering its diplomatic relations with Israel and Turkey. Rather, it sought to maintain a close relationship with all parties that would enable Washington to balance one against another. Since the

unveiling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the American openness toward Iran has been aimed at consolidating the equilibrium that Washington has long relied on to prevent any individual state from gaining regional hegemony. In fact, an American policy

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<sup>31</sup>Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan "America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed," *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>.

<sup>32</sup>Steven Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021, <https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report-pdf/dp-cook-no.-2.pdf>.

that would support one regional power over others is not feasible because the superiority of any regional power over its competitors would make offshore balancing ineffective, drawing America once again to need to adopt onshore balancing. In other words, the more equal the regional powers are in terms of their material capabilities, the more chance there will be that they balance each other, and the less chance of imbalances in the regional status quo.

Similarly, the objectives of China's strategy in the Middle East are multiple, manifold, and interrelated. Over the decades, China's interest and economic reliance on the Middle East have grown significantly and the region has acquired greater geostrategic importance.<sup>33</sup> From Beijing's perspective, the Middle East has become a vital source of energy resources, a promising market for trade and infrastructure investment, and a source of growing demand for military arms sales.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the Middle East has become China's pivot point for the BRI due to its unique geographical location at the juncture of Asia, Europe, and Africa. In its latest *Arab Policy Paper* released in April 2016, Beijing emphasized pursuing common development, mutual benefit, and maintaining a higher level of "win-win cooperation" with Middle Eastern states.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Beijing energy security strategy also highlighted the importance of preservation and sustainability of energy sources.<sup>36</sup>

China's rapid economic growth, fueled by its demand for energy resources, portended Beijing's deeper involvement in Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>37</sup> But energy is only part of the reason that China is seeking a larger

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<sup>33</sup>Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon* (Santa Monica, Calif. RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1229.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1229.html).

<sup>34</sup>Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper and Gustaaf Geeraerts, "Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition," *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2015), pp. 575–596.

<sup>35</sup>Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Arab Policy Paper*, January 13, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1331683.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml).

<sup>36</sup>"Energy in China's New Era," State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 21, 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202012/21/content\\_WS5fe0572bc6d0f725769423cb.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202012/21/content_WS5fe0572bc6d0f725769423cb.html).

<sup>37</sup>Steven Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*.

role in this vital region. Beijing's interest in regional trade and infrastructure investments has also grown in recent years. By 2019, China had surpassed the United States as the largest trading partner of most Middle Eastern countries.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Chinese business investments and contracts have expanded throughout the region, as many countries are now enlisted under BRI and AIIB programs.

Beijing has also viewed regional geopolitical developments as an opportunity to deepen its involvement and enhance its power. For example, during the 2014 China–Arab Cooperation Forum, a 1 + 2 + 3 cooperation framework was proposed by President Xi Jinping that, while placing energy security at its “core,” defined infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as “two wings” and nuclear energy, space satellites, and new energy fields as three areas for “breakthroughs.”<sup>39</sup> Beijing's pursuit of comprehensive partnerships in the Middle East has focused on oil-producing countries and those adjacent to the region's canals and straits (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). Ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and the Suez Canal is a guarantee that trade through these areas will flow smoothly.<sup>40</sup>

Middle Eastern states have welcomed China's investments and linked them to their national strategies. For example, despite U.S. concerns, the state-owned Shanghai International Port Group was allowed to invest and operate Israel's Haifa Port for 25 years. Moreover, Chinese companies are also working on building and operating a private terminal in Ashdod and a light rail in Tel Aviv.<sup>41</sup> In Iran, China committed to invest \$400 billion over

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<sup>38</sup>See ChinaMed Data, *ChinaMed Index: Middle East*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east> and U.S. Trade Representative, “Middle East/North Africa (MENA),” Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2021, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-east/north-africa>.

<sup>39</sup>Xu Shaoshi, “The ‘1 + 2 + 3’ Pattern Promotes Practical Cooperation Between China and Middle Eastern Countries,” in Xu Shaoshi, ed., *BRI and International Cooperation in Industrial Capacity: Country Cooperation Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 374–427.

<sup>40</sup>Steven Cook, *Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East*.

<sup>41</sup>Benjamin Kerstein, “Outgoing Head of Mossad: Qatari Aid to Gaza ‘Got a Little Out of Control,’” *The Algemeiner*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/06/08/outgoing-head-of-mossad-qatari-aid-to-gaza-got-a-little-out-of-control/>.

the next 25 years in exchange for a continuous supply of oil.<sup>42</sup> Many GCC states have also linked their reforms and growth strategies to the BRI. For instance, Saudi Arabia has incorporated the BRI into its ambitious national transformation program — Vision 2030 initiative — believing that the BRI is “one of the main pillars of the Saudi *Vision 2030* which would seek to make China among the Kingdom’s biggest economic partners.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, Saudi Arabia welcomed Huawei’s investment in 5G networks and hosted its largest flagship store outside China.<sup>44</sup> Saudi Arabia also entrusted the NEOM’s telecommunications infrastructure, a futuristic mega-city being built on the Red Sea in northwest Saudi Arabia, to Huawei.<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Kuwaiti officials stated that the BRI partnership with China aids the country in achieving its *2035 Vision for Development*.<sup>46</sup> In the UAE and Qatar, the presence of Chinese banks has been used to facilitate trading in the Chinese RMB by negotiating currency swap agreements.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, China has militarized the UAE’s Khalifa Port, which is operated by China’s giant COSCO shipping conglomerate in accordance with the BRI’s bilateral partnerships.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, “China, with \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2021, [https://www.google.com.hk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwil4\\_S7hpT8AhVEBDQI-HaqkC6cQFnoECAoQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2021%2F03%2F27%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fchina-iran-deal.html&usg=AOvVaw2dIOOqcA6oc0\\_y4ErfE4Kd](https://www.google.com.hk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwil4_S7hpT8AhVEBDQI-HaqkC6cQFnoECAoQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2021%2F03%2F27%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fchina-iran-deal.html&usg=AOvVaw2dIOOqcA6oc0_y4ErfE4Kd).

<sup>43</sup>Jonathan Fulton, “The G.C.C. Countries and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Curbing Their Enthusiasm?” Middle East Institute, October 17, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/gcc-countries-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-curbing-their-enthusiasm>.

<sup>44</sup>David Sacks, “China’s Huawei Is Winning the 5G Race. Here’s What the United States Should Do To Respond,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 29, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-huawei-5g>.

<sup>45</sup>“Creating New Value Together Through the Innovations of 5G, AI, and Cloud Is the Digital Foundation Supporting Saudi Vision 2030, Huawei Says,” Huawei, December 16, 2020, <https://e.huawei.com/en/news/ebg/2020/create-new-value-huawei-day-ksa-2020>.

<sup>46</sup>Jonathan Fulton, “The G.C.C. Countries and China’s BRI.”

<sup>47</sup>Jonathan Fulton, “Situating Saudi Arabia in China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2020), pp. 362–383.

<sup>48</sup>Gordon Lubold and Warren Strobel, “Secret Chinese Port Project in Arabian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With U.A.E.,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2021.

Historically, the Middle East has been a focal point of global geopolitical competition. As Scobell argues, “for a country that considers itself a great power, being seen as a major player in the Middle East is important. Hence China desires to raise its profile in the region.”<sup>49</sup> Beijing has sought to distinguish itself from other powers by insisting on the long-held principle of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty and development paths and models.<sup>50</sup> Over the past few decades, China has been able to achieve its security objectives in the Middle East with minimal effort. However, this might not be the case in the coming years. China prefers not to engage directly with the region’s complex security issues. Until now, America’s security role in the region has paved the way for China to extend its economic influence. For example, the U.S. Fifth Fleet has secured the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz by countering piracy and securing the vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait. More importantly, Washington has traditionally played a decisive part in maintaining the region’s balance of power. However, growing U.S. disengagement from regional affairs is likely to change the security equation in the Middle East. Therefore, it is likely that China will increasingly engage with security-related issues to sustain and protect its growing economic interests. Nevertheless, Beijing’s regional hedging strategy will struggle to fill the security vacuum left by the United States.

### Implications of Sino-American Rivalry for Gulf Security

Contemporary shifts in the global balance of power have led to dramatic alterations in the attitudes and policies of the Gulf security subcomplex. Since decolonization, the United States has sought to fill the power vacuum, not only for political and ideological motives, but also for ideational and economic rationales. Meanwhile, Washington’s foreign policies have been

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<sup>49</sup>Andrew Scobell, “Why the Middle East Matters to China,” in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Niv Horesh, eds., *China’s Presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt, One Road Initiative* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 12.

<sup>50</sup>Ilari Papa, “China’s Foreign Minister Tours the Middle East: Outcomes and Implications,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-foreign-minister-tours-middle-east-outcomes-and-implications>.

characterized by a more pragmatic approach. For example, to contain communist expansion in the region, Washington enlisted the collaboration of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia to assemble an anti-communist coalition.<sup>51</sup> With the decline of the Soviet threat and alleviation of the belligerence among Arab states and Israel, America's security policy in the region increasingly focused on advancing the Israeli-Arab peace process, enhancing energy security, combating international terrorism, and curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

However, U.S. political, military, and economic disengagement from the region has been paralleled by the rising profile of other global powers seeking opportunities to fill the widening power vacuum. Russia has demonstrated its security commitment to regional allies by siding with President Assad against his Western adversaries. In addition, Russia plays a notable role in the region as a supplier of non-Western weapons systems. Nevertheless, China is the most important new security player in the region. Beijing's pivot toward the Middle East also echoes the desire of several regional actors that want it to play a more active role. Beijing has offered a set of economic solutions that are seen in the region as opportunities to strengthen national economies and diversify their sources of income.

Moreover, while Washington restricts arms sales and the use of its technology to maintain the balance of power in Israel's favor, Beijing has been less reluctant to provide military equipment. For example, when Washington refused to provide Saudi Arabia with advanced missiles during the Iran-Iraq war, Riyadh turned to Beijing by openly endorsing the "one-China" policy in exchange for a CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missile system.<sup>52</sup> More recently, after Washington vetoed its Gulf partners' requests to purchase advanced drone technology, Beijing made them available to the UAE, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and agreed to build the region's first drone factory in Saudi Arabia.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Stephen Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power."

<sup>52</sup>T. Y. Wang, "Competing for Friendship: The Two Chinas and Saudi Arabia," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1993), pp. 63–82.

<sup>53</sup>Natasha Turak, "Pentagon Is Scrambling as China 'Sells the Hell Out Of' Armed Drones to U.S. Allies," CNBC, February 21, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/21/pentagon-is-scrambling-as-china-sells-the-hell-out-of-armed-drones-to-americas-allies.html>.

Arguably, the Middle East is no longer viewed in Washington as a strategic priority. Nevertheless, the dynamics inherent in the emerging Sino-American competition are likely to play out in the region. While in the coming decades, the Indo-Pacific will be *the* pivot region in the geopolitical competition between the Washington and Beijing, the Middle East possesses enough strategic assets to keep the two powers conditionally engaged. This, however, presents new challenges for the regional actors that will need to reconcile the interests of the long-term security partner and a promising economic partner.

### Mapping the Gulf Security Subcomplex

Several variables, including the region's waning appeal to U.S. decision-makers and Chinese hitherto strategic ambivalence, may have opened the way for regional states to seek a cooperative framework. The al-Ula Declaration ending Qatar's boycott,<sup>54</sup> the Iranian-Saudi talks,<sup>55</sup> the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership,<sup>56</sup> and the Turkish-Arab Quartet talks<sup>57</sup> are possible examples of regional cooperation.

However, despite these ambitious attempts, it may prove difficult to achieve a cooperative framework in a regional milieu where the interests of the actors are at odds. For instance, despite its reassurances, Tehran wants cooperation that does not affect its nuclear ambitions, ballistic arsenal, and regional expansions, which is inconsistent with the interests of the Gulf states, Israel, and Turkey. Also, the regional actors might signal cooperation merely to satisfy international demands. For instance, Iran's objective in participating in multilateral nuclear talks is to ease U.S. sanctions by

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<sup>54</sup>Gulf Cooperation Council, *The Al-Ula Declaration Statement*, January 5, 2021, <https://gcc41.org/press-releases/the-al-ula-declaration>.

<sup>55</sup>"Iran-Saudi Talks," United States Institute of Peace, May 4, 2021, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/may/04/secret-iran-saudi-talks>.

<sup>56</sup>"Final Statement of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership," Government of Iraq, August 29, 2021, <https://gds.gov.iq/final-statement-of-the-baghdad-conference-for-cooperation-and-partnership/>.

<sup>57</sup>Muhittin Ataman, "How is the Turkey-Gulf Normalization Going?" *Daily Sabah*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/how-is-the-turkey-gulf-normalization-going>.

signaling to Washington that it has become a responsible stakeholder. By the same token, Saudi Arabia realizes that it is difficult to defy the will of the great powers regarding the need for Tehran to return to the nuclear agreement. Therefore, to ease international pressures, Riyadh's talks with Tehran may be consistent with international demands and the approval of the United States.

In terms of the regional balance of power, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran register the largest military expenditures. As G-20 members, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have significant economic advantages in regional economic competitions, whereas Israel has a nuclear advantage and a well-established partnership with the United States. In contrast, economically exhausted and socially fragmented, Iran tries to raise its profile by allying with regional militias and increasing its nuclear capabilities. Another key point is that Turkey and Iran do not want Saudi Arabia to monopolize the leadership of the Islamic world, while the latter see their increasing interference in the Arab world as an existential threat.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, security cooperation in the Middle East is seemingly intractable. The most likely scenario is that the regional powers will cautiously evaluate their partnerships with the great powers in order to safeguard their security interests. Consequently, regional powers — especially those frustrated with the status quo — will seek pragmatic hedging strategies to expand their security and economic partnerships.

At the regional level, according to the balance of power theory, alliance formation is the most common way to respond to a perceived threat. Accordingly, regional status quo powers will *balance* against revisionist powers, while small and weak states are likely to *bandwagon*.<sup>59</sup> Over the last two decades, Iran displays potential hegemonic power. It has consolidated its sphere of influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, as well as Palestine. Therefore, despite the strong dynamics imposed by the security dilemma, other regional powers (e.g., Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia), may find a common objective in balancing against Iranian regional preponderance. Accordingly, it is possible to anticipate the strategic options

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<sup>58</sup>Joseph Sipalan and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Snub Malaysia's Muslim Summit," Reuters, December 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-muslim-alliance-idUSKBN1YM0G3>.

<sup>59</sup>Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power."



that the regional powers and the small and vulnerable states are likely to pursue in dealing with the emerging regional challenges and global geopolitical competition.

### *Iran: Unlimited-Aims Revisionist State*

According to the balance-of-interest theory, Iran can be considered a revisionist state that is not satisfied with the regional status quo. Therefore, to pursue its goals, Tehran is willing to accept greater risks since revisionist states are “uninhibited by the fear of loss, [are] free to pursue reckless expansion.”<sup>60</sup> For example, as a result of President Trump’s maximum pressure policy, Iran downed a U.S. drone and targeted its military base in Iraq.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the status quo states, Iran is a power-maximizing state willing to put its survival on the line, not only to maintain but to improve its standing in the regional order. Thus, Iran can be characterized as an unlimited-aims revisionist state because its expansionist ambitions cannot be easily curbed and, therefore, it constitutes a significant challenge to the status quo states.<sup>62</sup>

Geopolitical developments in the Gulf region have served Iran’s goals of extending its sphere of influence. Despite its deteriorating economy, Iran has harnessed its military and militia capabilities to challenge the status quo and expand its ideological agenda. Among its regional competitors, Iran has the second-strongest military and maintains active militias in many regional capitals. Given its revisionist strategy, Tehran has forged pragmatic partnerships with both China and Russia. Notwithstanding, it is important to emphasize the economic factor in the regional balance of power. Iran has the worst economic situation among its competitors due to international sanctions. Since military power requires a solid economic foundation, Iran has tried to bypass this predicament, particularly trying to reassure the international community by adhering to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, as the agreement has suffered significant obstacles, Iran may view the Sino-Iranian multi-trillion-dollars partnership

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<sup>60</sup>Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit,” pp. 103–104.

<sup>61</sup>Luis da Vinha and Anthony Dutton, “Embracing the Maverick: The Evolution of President Donald Trump’s Management of Foreign Policy-Making,” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2022), pp. 4–35.

<sup>62</sup>See Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit.”

as an alternative for overcoming international sanctions and thus achieving economic security.<sup>63</sup>

In the current regional context, it is unlikely that Iran will seek regional alliances. Rather, it will try to dismantle any balancing alliance against it, taking advantage of its offensive capabilities and regional militias. Therefore, Tehran's foreign policy is likely to pursue two key strategies: Divide-and-rule and coercion. First and foremost, Iran realizes that it has become a formidable challenge to many of its rivals. For instance, Iran has no interest in the recent convergence between Saudi Arabia — the economic power in the Gulf — and Israel — the U.S.-backed nuclear power in the Levant — and will look to undermine any further rapprochement between these two actors. Moreover, Tehran will seek to exhaust Riyadh in its war with the Iranian-backed Yemeni Houthi militias and keep its militias in the Levant focused on Israel. Iran will also bolster the Islamist anti-Zionist narrative if Saudi Arabia normalizes its relations with Israel. As for the small and weak states, the blackmail strategy is enough to put them on the sidelines, at least if they resist bandwagoning. Notably, this strategy has been effective in the GCC countries, as the small Gulf states have no intent in dealing with potential Iranian military threats. Therefore, this may pragmatically push all the Gulf states, except for Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, to maintain varying degrees of diplomatic relationships with Tehran.

### *Turkey: Limited-Aims Revisionist State*

According to balance-of-interest theory, Turkey can be characterized as a revisionist power with limited objectives since it is prepared to incur high costs to maintain the status quo and assume much higher costs to expand its values. Turkish foreign policy reflects the reality of dissatisfaction with the status quo. However, this tendency is often constrained by concerns of losing relative gains. Therefore, Ankara often pursues its expansionist policies in an opportunistic manner. Therefore, it falls into the limited-aims revisionist states category.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, such countries are likely to

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<sup>63</sup>Ebrahim Fallahi, "Iran-China Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap for Mutual Prosperity," *Tehran Times*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/459437/Iran-China-strategic-partnership-a-roadmap-for-mutual-prosperity>.

<sup>64</sup>See Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit."

temporarily reconcile with the status quo states as an exceptional measure to pursue an emerging existential non-security threat.

Even as it shifts the bulk of its strategic resources and attention elsewhere, Washington cannot afford to turn its back on the Gulf region, because Beijing's growing power and influence in the region has set off the alarm bells across Western capitals.

In fact, in a departure from its stated *Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbors*, Turkey has adopted an assertive policy regionally and internationally.<sup>65</sup> Since the Arab Spring, Recep Erdoğan's administration has resorted to the political Islam represented by the Muslim Brotherhood movement to expand its sphere of influence in the Arab world. Nevertheless, its support of these movements failed in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia, further contributing to its regional isolation.<sup>66</sup> Globally, Turkey's relations with Brussels and Washington have deteriorated due to recent policies, for example, gas explorations near Cyprus, threat to push migrants to Greece, and purchase and development of the Russian S-400 air defense system. However, regional geopolitical shifts, as well as domestic challenges have led to marked

changes in Turkey's regional policy. Following the rapprochement with GCC members, there have been continued Qatari-brokered Turkish attempts to resolve problems with the Arab Quartet.<sup>67</sup> These attempts can be linked to Turkey's domestic politics. For instance, there are ongoing disagreements over the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) policies. Moreover, the Turkish lira has lost nearly 75 percent of its value against the

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<sup>65</sup>Gencer Özcan, "Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours," European Institute of the Mediterranean, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/policy-of-zero-problems-with-the-neighbours/>.

<sup>66</sup>Yahya al-Habib, "Like Dominoes. Does the Fall of Political Islam Extend to the Source of Turkey?" Hawar News Agency, September 24, 2021, <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/like-dominoes-does-the-fall-of-political-islam-extend-to-the-source-of-turkey-h26876.html>.

<sup>67</sup>Muhittin Ataman, "How is the Turkey-Gulf Normalization Going?"

dollar, with inflation at approximately 20 percent and unemployment at 14 percent.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the presidential elections of 2023 may temporarily spur a policy of non-confrontation with the Gulf states to reduce its isolation, at least with its Sunni neighbors.

Accordingly, despite the crisis in Saudi-Turkish relations, it is premature to expect any Saudi-Turkish rapprochement unless there are common existential security goals that can overcome disputes and pave the way for the formation of a pragmatic alliance.<sup>69</sup> As for the Iranian nuclear threat, although Ankara rarely expresses its fears publicly, the pressures of geographical proximity and the clash of interests in several countries, such as Syria and Azerbaijan, are enough to anticipate a heightened sense of insecurity. If Iran does abandon its nuclear program this may open economic opportunities for Ankara and exacerbate the security dilemma for Riyadh and Jerusalem. Any potential strengthening of economic relations with Tehran may be a decisive factor in shifting the balance of power in the region in favor of Iran, regardless of the geopolitical contradictions in the regional agenda of the two states. If Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, it is likely that Turkey will initially seek to balance against Iran by joining an anti-Iranian arrangement as a means of containment and subsequently pursuing its own nuclear deterrent capabilities. In short, Turkey is no longer an insulator state as some regional security complex theorists have suggested, but rather a major player in the Gulf region.<sup>70</sup> Despite its regional revisionist tendencies, Ankara has not gambled all its political cards, but rather kept options open for restoring relations with the regional actors. Thus, taking into consideration Turkey's existing military resources and alliances (e.g., NATO), regional powers such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, may eventually prefer to try to draw Turkey into their security bloc.

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<sup>68</sup>Steven Cook, "Erdogan Has Never Been in This Much Trouble," *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/24/erdogan-has-never-been-in-this-much-trouble/>.

<sup>69</sup>Benjamin Harvey and Selcan Hacaoglu, "Erdogan's Big Gamble: Taking on Mideast Powerbroker Saudi Arabia," *Bloomberg*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-25/erdogan-s-big-gamble-taking-on-mideast-powerbroker-saudi-arabia#xj4y7vzkg>.

<sup>70</sup>Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

### *Israel: Status Quo State*

Israel, for its part, is satisfied with the U.S.-backed regional status quo and has been one of its main beneficiaries. Accordingly, it tends to shoulder high costs for deterring regional revisionist states and secure the relative gains obtained from the existing order.<sup>71</sup> Among its competitors, Israel has a singular advantage derived from its nuclear capabilities and its strong security partnership with Washington. Domestically, its vital national interest lies in fending off armed Palestinian attacks and regional interference. Regionally, it seeks to prevent any other powers from gaining nuclear or ballistic capabilities which can plunge the region into an arms race that may upset the current balance of power and jeopardize its current military advantage.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, it actively endeavors to end its regional isolation, which has been partially achieved through the “Abraham Accords” and subsequent diplomatic initiatives.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, Israel’s main adversary is Iran that seeks to destabilize its domestic security by supporting Hamas and Hezbollah. In addition, Tehran’s nuclear ambitions have prompted Israel to allocate \$1.5 billion for a possible retaliation against Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities.<sup>74</sup> Despite any possible diplomatic fallout, particularly with the United States, for Israel eliminating the nuclear threat would still be preferable to having to coexist with a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>75</sup> Despite Washington’s assurances to Jerusalem that Iran will not develop nuclear

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<sup>71</sup>See Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit.”

<sup>72</sup>Raphael Ahren, “If the Enemy of My Enemy Gets the Bomb: Saudi Nuclear Plan gives Israel Headache,” *Times of Israel*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/if-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-gets-the-bomb-saudi-nuclear-plan-gives-israel-headache/>.

<sup>73</sup>Alexander Cornwell, “Israel, UAE Boost Ties with Free Trade Pact,” Reuters, May 31, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-free-trade-deal-ambassador-2022-05-31/>; and Dion Nissenbaum, “Saudi Arabia Moves Toward Eventual Ties with Israel,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-moves-toward-eventual-ties-with-israel-11654517783>.

<sup>74</sup>“Israel Said to Approve \$1.5 Billion Budget for Potential Strike on Iran,” *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-approve-1-5-billion-budget-for-potential-strike-on-iran/>.

<sup>75</sup>Jonathan Lis and Yaniv Kubovich, “Netanyahu at Mossad Chief Ceremony: Israel Won’t Allow a Nuclear Iran, Even at Cost of Friction with U.S.,” *Haaretz*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-we-cannot-allow-a-nuclear-armed-iran-even-at-cost-of-friction-with-u-s-1.9864125>.

weapons and that it would consider other options if the JCPOA is not revived, these promises have not eased Israeli anxiety.<sup>76</sup>

Given these considerations of Iran's ambitions, it is likely that Israel may participate in regional arrangements seeking to balance Iranian threats and maintain the status quo. Moreover, neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey would be satisfied with a nuclear-armed Iran. While the former director of the Saudi Intelligence Agency, Turki al-Faisal, devoted his 16th IISS Manama Dialogue to criticizing Israel, the fact is that when more pragmatic interests are at stake, "security considerations take precedence over ideological preference."<sup>77</sup> As a result, to avoid Iranian regional hegemony and curb its nuclear ambitions, Israel is likely to seek a regional balancing coalition against Tehran.

### *Saudi Arabia: Status Quo State*

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia is a regional status quo actor that behaves like a defensive and security-maximizing power. Unlike its revisionist counterparts, a status power tends to undervalue its non-security expansion due to its high costs. Indeed, status quo states consider military options as a last resort, and thus tend to preserve their national interests by exploiting other resources available to them. Moreover, their foreign policy can be best characterized as a response to the actions of revisionist powers.<sup>78</sup>

Over the decades, Saudi Arabia has played an important role in the Arab and Islamic worlds, as well as in the global economy. Its embrace of the two holiest sites in the Islamic world (Mecca and Medina), as well as its founding and leadership of the Muslim World League and the Islamic Development Bank, have strengthened its appeal in these two worlds.

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<sup>76</sup>Briefing Room, "Readout from NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan Leading a Meeting of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Consultative Group," White House, October 5, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/05/readout-from-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-leading-a-meeting-of-the-u-s-israel-strategic-consultative-group/>.

<sup>77</sup>Turki al-Faisal, "New Security Partnerships in the Middle East," 16th IISS Manama Dialogue, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/-/media/files/manama-dialogue/2020/plenary-transcripts/p6/hrh-prince-turki-al-faisal-al-saud—as-delivered.pdf>; and Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," p. 24.

<sup>78</sup>See Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit."

Globally, Riyadh is a member of the G-20, an influential member of OPEC, and the sixth-largest country in terms of military expenditures. Taken together, these factors have been harnessed to maximize security and bring stability to the current U.S.-backed regional order. However, there are several challenges that may limit these advantages. To begin with, there is competition with Iran, and to a lesser extent with Turkey, for the leadership role of the Arab and Islamic worlds.<sup>79</sup> Also, sharp fluctuations in oil revenues create a challenging economic situation for Riyadh, as does the uncertainty about the future of America's security commitment to the region.

Regionally, geographic proximity and historical enmity remain important in considering security alignments. For example, Saudi Arabia has failed to counter Iranian expansion in four Arab capitals. Therefore, due to the inability of Saudi Arabia to gain the support of a Great or regional power to help contain Iran, the best available option would be balancing with status quo states against Tehran. Hence, Iran's offensive intentions outweigh considerations of the aggregate power of Turkey or Israel. Indeed, as Walt argues, "intentions, not power, are the crucial" factor in alignment.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, it is likely that in the near future we will witness a pragmatic Saudi-Turkish rapprochement and an undisclosed, if tacit, security understanding between Saudi Arabia and Israel to contain Iran.

Given the economic and geopolitical context, Riyadh has pursued a strategic hedging policy in the post-Arab Spring era. Economically, Riyadh's oil revenues, which constitute the largest share of its GDP, have contributed to advancing developments in various sectors.<sup>81</sup> However, as oil price fluctuations accelerate, diversification of revenue sources has become a key objective.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Saudi Arabia recently launched its grand post-oil-era

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<sup>79</sup>Sipalan and Kalin, "Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Snub Malaysia's Muslim Summit."

<sup>80</sup>Stephen Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," p. 13.

<sup>81</sup>General Authority for Statistics, "Gross Domestic Product First Quarter, Saudi Arabia's National Accounts Statistics," 2021, [https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/GDP%20release%20report%20Q1\\_%202021%20EN.pdf](https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/GDP%20release%20report%20Q1_%202021%20EN.pdf).

<sup>82</sup>U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Oil and Petroleum Products Explained," U.S. Energy Information Administration, October 7, 2021, <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/oil-and-petroleum-products/prices-and-outlook.php>.

initiative, *Vision 2030*, which aims to create a more sustainable economy.<sup>83</sup> In practice, however, this ambitious vision requires a stable regional environment and advantageous economic partnerships. Therefore, economic hedging with China has also been a priority for Saudi policymakers. The Saudis see the relationship with China as a means of ensuring a long-term oil importer, a potential investor in its Vision 2030, an alternative arms supplier, and a potential provider of nuclear energy.

Moreover, Russia also factors into Saudi security calculations. Since 2016, a pragmatic Saudi-Russian partnership has grown and Riyadh and Moscow announced the “OPEC+” agreement and recently signed an agreement for expanding joint military cooperation with Russia.<sup>84</sup> This rapprochement with Moscow reveals Riyadh’s interest in attempting to fend off U.S. unilateral policies in the region, ensure favorable oil prices, attract potential new security partners, and attract or/and neutralize Russia’s influence over regional issues. In sum, Saudi Arabia’s response to the declining economic sustainability of oil and its growing security concerns has compelled it to turn to Washington’s main competitors. However, sustaining this strategic hedging approach while avoiding American reaction will present diplomatic challenges that Riyadh will need to learn to navigate.

Despite Saudi Arabia’s political and economic maneuvers, the long-term strategic security partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia will remain strong, primarily due to their common interests in the Middle East. For half a century, their shared goals of fending off communism and managing global energy security have fostered close cooperation.<sup>85</sup> The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marred the relationship,

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<sup>83</sup>Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision-2030*, 2016, [https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi\\_vision203.pdf](https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf).

<sup>84</sup>Khalid bin-Salman, “Agreement on developing joint military cooperation” Twitter, August 24, 2021, <https://twitter.com/kbsalsaud/status/1429925422490341376>; and Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, “Declaration of Cooperation OPEC and non-OPEC,” 2016, [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/static\\_files\\_project/media/downloads/publications/Declaration%20of%20Cooperation.pdf](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/Declaration%20of%20Cooperation.pdf).

<sup>85</sup>Jon Alterman, *The Other side of the World: China, the United States, and the Struggle for Middle East Security* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170303\\_Alterman\\_OtherSideOfWorld\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170303_Alterman_OtherSideOfWorld_Web.pdf).



as did the Arab Spring. Under mutual uncertainty, the weight of their partnership has arguably not been diminished, but rather tamed to better aid Washington in pursuing its strategic regional security objectives. Accordingly, Washington still seeks Saudi Arabia's cooperation in achieving its priorities in the region: (1) Containing Iran's assertiveness and nuclear program, (2) encouraging the normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations, and (3) urging Saudi Arabia to respect human rights. An indication of the strength of the relationship is that, after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Washington did not impose severe sanctions on Saudi Arabia, limiting their reaction to restricting arms sales that were subsequently lifted.<sup>86</sup> Although human rights concerns are likely to predominate in future relations, the foundations of the Saudi-American partnership will remain solid despite growing political differences and geopolitical tensions.

In Saudi-led GCC states, the Israeli threat has been de-securitized in exchange for a growing securitization of the Iranian threat. A recent study has shown that there is a new cultural discourse emanating from the Arab Gulf states on social media that supports further normalization.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, when the U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan raised the issue of normalizing relations with Israel, Saudi officials did not reject the notion.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Bahrain's normalization with Israel may reflect a cautious Saudi consent.<sup>89</sup> There are still concerns that any Saudi-Israeli normalization may be exploited by regional actors (both state and non-state) to mobilize the Islamic Street against Saudi Arabia. However, for the foreseeable future, as the U.S. security footprint in the region recedes, Riyadh and Jerusalem may eventually find themselves confronted with the necessity of

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<sup>86</sup>Andrew Desiderio, "Senate Backs Biden Admin Weapons Sale to Saudi Arabia," *Politico*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/amp/news/2021/12/07/senate-biden-saudi-arabia-523915>.

<sup>87</sup>Gadi Hitman and Moti Zwilling, "Normalization with Israel: An Analysis of Social Networks Discourse Within Gulf States," *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2022), pp. 1–27.

<sup>88</sup>Jordan Williams, "Sullivan Raised Normalizing Relations with Israel During Meeting with Saudi Crown Prince," *Hill*, October 20, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/577584-sullivan-raised-normalized-relations-with>.

<sup>89</sup>Stephen Kalin and Rory Jones, "A Rabbi Searches for a Congregation in Saudi Arabia, Birthplace of Islam," *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-rabbi-searches-for-a-congregation-in-saudi-arabia-birthplace-of-islam-11635864559>.

establishing an informal yet pragmatic security alliance to maintain a regional order favorable to their vital interests.

### ***Small and Vulnerable States: Sideline States***

Small and vulnerable states can be defined as those that do not have significant defensive or offensive capabilities that would enable them to maximize their security. Moreover, these states might suffer from weak state-society relations for several reasons: the illegitimacy of political elites and national institutions (e.g., Yemen and Syria); conflicts between local ethnic, religious, and political groups (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen); and the failure of multiculturalism (e.g., Iraq and Lebanon). Therefore, these countries, have often been subject to regional and global incursions and transgressions. As Schweller argues, "in a world of predators and prey, these states are prey."<sup>90</sup> Moreover, in the Gulf subcomplex, one finds that the small Gulf states (i.e., Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman) do not have enough material power to individually defend their interests. As for Iraq, the cohesion between the state and society is still lacking. As a result, these countries are more likely to adopt a hedging strategy to achieve as much independence as possible or at least pursue a bandwagoning strategy to accommodate and appease the source of threats.

### **Conclusion**

The Middle East has been, is still, and will continue to be a theater of intense geopolitical competition between global and regional powers. Since decolonization, the patterns of security competition in the Gulf region have become more interconnected and regionalized, while also being more aligned with, and reinforced by great power competition. In the post-Cold War era, there have been two major shifts in regional security arrangements. First, since Egypt's withdrawal from the geopolitical scene in the wake of the peace agreements with Israel, the Levant's subcomplex has become the second core of the regional security landscape, leading to further de-regionalization of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Second, since the 1980s, the Gulf subcomplex (Iranian-Saudi subcomplex) has become the

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<sup>90</sup>Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit," p. 101.

dominant core of Gulf security, particularly since Iraq was removed from the balance of power equation in 2003. Meanwhile, Washington played a crucial role in military-political security issues in order to maintain a regional order favorable to its vital interests. Therefore, Washington's support of its GCC partners prompted Iran to maximize its power at the expense of other Arab-Gulf states.

However, despite its long history of foreign involvement, the Middle East has recently witnessed a dramatic shift in the nature and substance of the global powers' engagement. Since the Arab Spring, the U.S. approach to the region has shifted from a strong-military presence to an off-shore balancing approach because the region is no longer viewed as an existential threat to its prosperity and security. As a result, the emerging political and military vacuum has contributed to accelerating patterns of competition among regional revisionist and status quo powers. Indeed, Iran has strengthened its influence in four Arab capitals, the Turkish-Qatari coalition capitalized on political Islam to reap the spoils, and the Saudi-led Arab Quartet launched counterrevolutions in many Arab Spring countries to restore the status quo. Meanwhile, while China has maintained its strategic ambivalence regarding military-political issues, it has increasingly engaged in economic partnerships with most regional powers. It has become clear that the Gulf countries, while gaining partial independence in the wake of the Cold War, are now more independent in managing regional military-political affairs than ever before.

While Moscow and Beijing are undoubtedly working to increase their influence in the political and economic spheres, it should not be forgotten that neither country has yet played a leading role in shaping the regional order. However, the growing geopolitical competition among the great powers will undoubtedly affect the regional actor's security strategies and policies. New regional security arrangements are based on the premise that the formation of pragmatic security alliances is the best way to respond to regional threats. Accordingly, status quo powers such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as the limited-aims revisionist power Turkey are more prone to regional security cooperation in the short- and medium-term. In contrast, unlimited-aims revisionist powers such as Iran will remain on the opposing side, while small and vulnerable states will seek to avoid the absolute inclination to either side, whether by sitting on the sidelines or through policies of appeasement. Moreover, Gulf security affairs have become more

regionalized under current geopolitical and economic conditions as this subregion becomes the vital core of the Middle Eastern security architecture pitting two opposing powerful states against each other, namely, an unlimited-aims revisionist state (Iran), and a status quo state (Saudi Arabia). As for the Levant subcomplex, it has become a secondary core dominated by a status quo state (Israel) in the absence of a peer competitor.

### **Publisher's Note**

Luis da Vinha is the sole author of the article. As of October 23, 2023, the article has been updated to reflect this change.