

# TRIANGULAR DYNAMICS: US RESPONSE TO CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Abstract:** New dynamics govern today's Middle East politics. At a time when Beijing has become a major player and the US perceives China as the sole credible threat to its global primacy, many Middle Eastern states play a triangulation game, offsetting Washington's pressure with deepening ties with China. In response, the US now sees the region through the prism of managing its rivalry with Beijing. The Biden administration's strategy is to identify key allies and integrate them into small networks to help protect American interests against Chinese influence. However, with such a strategy the US is setting itself up for frequent setbacks. Since those coalitions, based on the Abraham Accords, bypass the Palestinian issue, America's Arab allies often find themselves faced with escalation in the occupied territories, thus derailing the work of such networks. Besides, many of America's Middle East allies have no intention of getting embroiled in the US–Chinese tension.

**Keywords:** China, Middle East, Palestine, Biden Administration, Congress, Belt and Road Initiative, Middle East, Europe Economic Corridor, I2U2, Negev Forum

## Introduction

In July 2022, and in a press conference with the Israeli Prime Minister, President Biden reaffirmed that the US would remain active in the Middle East (ME). America, he said, does not intend to leave a “vacuum” to be filled by China (*China Daily*, 2022). Meeting with Arab leaders a few days later, the US president reiterated that the US “will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran” (*Free Press Journal*, 2022). In the two statements, the US president explained,

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in a few words, what the US “pivot to Asia” means for the Middle East; the Biden administration now sees the region through the prism of its antagonism with China.

In a stark contrast to Biden’s statements, a spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in Israel immediately retorted, “The Middle East is a land of its people, not anyone’s backyard. There is no so-called ‘vacuum’ there” (Yusha, 2022). Clearly, the struggle for the Middle East between China and the US is already underway.

This article explores the ways in which the Biden administration seeks to counter China’s growing influence in the region. It argues that the US seeks to create small networks of allies through which US interests can be protected. This strategy has its pitfalls; first, those networks, based on the Abraham Accords, gloss over the Palestinian issue and are, thus, often entrapped in the explosive policies of Israel in the occupied territories; second, Middle East states have no interest in getting entangled in the Sino–American rivalry, and they rather desire to take advantage of it. Besides, although there is a bipartisan consensus in Washington on China, such a consensus might prove to stop at the Middle East’s edge. A coalition of members from the far-right and the progressive left appears to be gaining ground in Congress, especially on Middle East issues, including on Middle East relations with China.

The article, first, gives an overview of China’s growing political, economic, and military influence in the Middle East. It, then, focuses on the US reaction to such a growing influence.

## China in the Middle East

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the cornerstone of President Xi Jinping’s foreign policy. It aims at opening markets for Chinese products, protecting China’s economic security, and securing energy supplies (Al-Tamimi, 2017: 596–622). The BRI has six main economic corridors and China has allocated billions of dollars in loans and investments particularly in infrastructure throughout that network (Belal, 2020: 47–66). To enhance the BRI, it established the Asian infrastructure development bank, a multilateral financial institution (Russel and Berger, 2020: 31). Beyond the original plan outlined by President Xi, the BRI grew to include a Digital Silk Road (DSR), a health silk road, and a green Belt and Road (Lew et al., 2021: 2). Of most concern to Washington is the DSR which aims at spreading China’s global technological influence through digital infrastructure, telecommunications, big data, software and hardware, e-commerce, and artificial intelligence (Jones et al., 2023: XII).

BRI is enthusiastically received especially in the Global South because it fills the void left by the West and multilateral lending institutions; Given the conditionalities of multilateral development banks (MDBs), today Chinese loans to developing countries “far exceeds” loans “by all major MDBs combined” (Lew et al., 2021: 13).

China insists that the BRI goals are strictly economic. However, when finalized, it would remake the global geopolitical landscape to the detriment of Washington's hegemony, potentially connecting more than 140 nations. The details of the BRI projects show that it expands China's influence across the world including in America's own immediate sphere – Latin America and the Caribbean. China does not shy away from making clear that it seeks to redraw the map of, at least, its own geographic region. For example, among the important goals stated by President Xi, China is to establish a new regional order in its own part of the world that works for Chinese interests (Russel and Berger, 2020: 16). Thus, the BRI is, clearly, about “fighting the geopolitical machinations of the US” (Al-Tamimi, 2017: 609).

It is in this broader context of China's global approach that China's growing involvement in the Middle East must be understood. Economically, the region is located at the heart of the maritime and land routes of the BRI. China has become increasingly dependent on energy supplies and 60% of Chinese trade with Africa and Europe runs through the Middle East. At least rhetorically, China stresses economic development the most. Economic prosperity, contends Chinese officials, is the “foundation for solving all problems” (Petranek, 2019: 12). This emphasis is explicitly touted as a Chinese alternative to Washington's focus on democracy and human rights. When development is the priority, “one cannot dogmatically rely on a set of rules made by Western democracies that first require a change of system if one is deemed undemocratic,” says China's Foreign Minister (Gang, 2022). Such an approach is welcome by Arab states, especially in times of rocky relations with the US.

China's interests in the region, however, are by no means merely commercial and economic. There are deeper geostrategic undercurrents, and a debate is already underway in China on whether to shred its non-intervention principle in the region (Lons et al., 2019: 4). For China, “fighting the machinations of US geopolitics,” to borrow Al-Tamimi's words, applies to the Middle East just as it applies elsewhere. As for Arab countries, “diversifying international relations” is a euphemism for hedging against the US, as will be discussed further below.

China signed strategic partnerships with Algeria, Iraq, and Morocco in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively (Jin, 2022). However, its closest ties are with three Arab countries: Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia (SA), and two regional powers, namely Iran and Israel.

For Arab states, the Chinese president's “1+2+3” formulas, outlined in a 2014 speech, put forward the framework of the relations. Energy cooperation is at the core and is given as number “1.” Number “2” refers to infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation, while number “3” refers to new and nuclear energy, and space satellites (Jin, 2022). Within eight years of putting forward this strategy, 20 Arab states, by early 2022, had signed cooperative agreements with China in fields ranging from energy, trade and investment, finance, infrastructure, and

high-tech (Jin, 2022). The Chinese government often touts its political approach to the Arab world as built on what it calls the “two supports”; to help the people pursue their development goals without foreign intervention and support the Resolution of regional conflicts through cooperation (*Global Times*, 2022). Using the special envoy mechanism, China has moved cautiously to mediate in conflicts in Syria and Yemen (Lons et al., 2019: 12), as well as in Palestine, Sudan, and Somalia. China was an active participant in the Iran nuclear agreement signed in 2015 (Sun, 2017: 354–371). Chinese mediation was particularly fruitful in reaching a Saudi–Iranian deal. China described that deal as an example of “best practices under the Global Security Initiative (GSI)”<sup>1</sup> and can be emulated in other regions (*Global Times*, 2023a). The deal marked a new dynamic in the region. It is not just that Middle East countries are displaying a posture independent from the West, but also that a new global power has become a major player in Middle East affairs. China actively participated in the Ukraine peace talks, held in Jeddah in August 2023 (Dutton, 2023).

The Sino–Arab relations have been gaining momentum even before President Xi met with nearly 20 Arab Leaders in Saudi Arabia in late 2022. The establishment of the Chinese Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004 heralded a new phase in Middle East international politics. Although CASCF projects a potential Chinese pan-Arab cooperation, China’s relations with Arab states are largely bilateral. With different degrees, China’s relations with each of the five Middle East countries, mentioned above, are bilateral with a trilateral dynamic especially on the military level, with the US and China as two poles.

But when it comes, specifically, to the three Arab states it is more of a triangulation game. Triangulation, in this article, refers to the “purposive manipulation of relationships within the triangle to change other nodes’ calculations” (Wesley, 2021: 408). Such a dynamic does not mean Arab states are interested in scaling back relations with the US. It rather means they hedge against the US and use the US–China tension to extract, from the US, better military deals and press for less US rhetoric on democracy and human rights. While China consolidates relations in the region to hedge against negative effects on its interests by Washington’s actions, the US strives to drive the region away from China and completely back into its fold.<sup>2</sup>

The oldest Sino–Arab relations is that with Egypt, going back to the Nasser era. Egypt was the first Arab country to recognize communist China (Ma and Chang, 2014: 26–27). At the height of independence movements, the relationship was largely political. The Bandung Conference brought the two countries closer, and the Chinese strong support of Palestinians was grounded in the context of national independence. Under Sadat and in the first few terms of Mubarak’s long tenure, the relation took a pragmatic tone focusing on economic and trade relations. The twenty-first century, however, marked a shift from just an export-import relationship to include a core investment component. The year 2006 marked another shift with the signing of a Strategic

Partnership Agreement, upon which China provided Egypt with weaponry, military training, and equipment (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012: 228–248). However, it was not until Presidents Sisi and Xi assumed office that the Sino–Egyptian relations took a dramatic turn because national priorities in both countries lent a new significance to the relationship. Under president Sisi, China serves as a linchpin in Egypt’s strategy to strike a balance in its relationships with the US (Razoux and Alaoui, 2019: 147). And for China, Egypt’s geographic location makes it a strategic asset in Chinese BRI plans. In 2014 a broader Egyptian–Chinese Strategic Partnership was announced (Razoux and Alaoui, 2019: 147–148). Thereafter, China’s cooperation includes revamping the Egyptian textile industry, the production of electricity, renewable energy, and infrastructure construction (Selim and Moaz, 2021: 360–361). Chinese companies finance industrial parks in Egypt’s Suez (Rumley, 2022: 7). China is the largest user of the Suez Canal, and more than 1,500 Chinese firms operate in Egypt (Rumley, 2022: 9). In 2022, Egypt announced it would issue bonds denominated in yuan (Lucente, 2023a). However, this plan has yet to materialize.

Egypt has become one of the most important recipients of Chinese weapons (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012: 228–248). With US reluctance to share its Unmanned Aerial Vehicle technology (UAV) with allies in the region, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia received long-range precision Wing Loong (unmanned aerial vehicles) from China (Rumley, 2022: 12). In 2019, the Chinese guided-missile destroyer participated in a joint military drill with Egypt’s Navy (Rumley, 2022: 6). Given the frequent flare-ups in US–Egyptian relations during the last decade, Egypt sees China as potential alternative source of weapons should the US use arms supplies as pressure leverage. Perhaps this is the reason behind Egypt’s keenness to maintain close military cooperation with China even though Chinese technology and technical support to Ethiopia has been crucial in the construction of the reconnaissance dam – an existential threat to Egypt’s water security. Likewise, Chinese interest in Egypt’s strategic importance might also be the reason why China’s reaction was mute when Egypt yielded to US pressure and resorted to Exxon and Nokia, instead of Huawei, to provide the 5G technology (Selim and Moaz, 2021: 363).

While its relations with the Gulf are relatively more recent, in the last decade China has become a major player in that region – forging relations that encompass trade, investment, infrastructure projects, and military sales. Today, almost half of all China’s trade (Mansour, 2016: 209) and 42% of its investment with the Arab world go to the Gulf states (Simon, 2021). Today roughly 40% of China’s oil imports come from the Gulf – including Iran (Simon, 2021). A foothold in the Gulf is important for China not just for energy supplies and BRI projects but also in two other domains. First, China’s quest for profits necessitates securing the trade routes against piracy. Second, China perceives of its influence in the Gulf as part of its ambitious geostrategic presence in Eurasia (Simon, 2021).

China puts particular emphasis on cooperation in digital and telecommunications technology either bilaterally or through the Arab League as evidenced by the China–Arab League Data Security Cooperation Initiative (Gering, 2023). Out of concern that Chinese projects endanger American military personnel and platforms, the US concluded in 2022 an agreement with Saudi Arabia for US companies to collaborate on 5G and 6G research (Rumley, 2022: 14). Today, the US invests in “a 1,000-mile submarine telecommunications cable which runs from Singapore to France through Egypt and the Horn of Africa” (Savoy and McKewon, 2022). Such a dynamic is but one example of the triangulation game.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the two largest recipients of Chinese investments and have extensive trade and infrastructure relations with China (Simon, 2021). In the late 2010s, Saudi Arabia proposed that China pay for its oil in yuan instead of the US dollar. In 2015, the central banks of Saudi Arabia and the UAE signed memoranda of understanding on yuan clearing arrangements. In 2018, yuan-denominated issuance hit a record high in the region of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), with the UAE as the largest issuer of yuan debt (Greenwald, 2019). In Davos, in January 2023, the Saudi Finance Minister raised eyebrows when he expressed openness’ to trading in currencies other than the US dollar (Lucente, 2023a). This statement came on the heels of the Chinese president’s visit to Saudi Arabia during which he encouraged GCC members to make use of the Shanghai Petroleum and Natural Gas Exchange to carry out yuan settlements of oil and gas (Baabood, 2022). While not a threat in the immediate future, the US is acutely aware that yuan arrangements constitute a major challenge to its interests, potentially creating an international parallel system of payments.

Chinese infrastructure projects underway in Saudi Arabia are designed to be compatible with Saudi modernization vision 2030 (Calabrese, 2022). Saudi Arabia embarked with China on establishing the Shandong Electric Power Corporation (SEPCO). After the establishment of the Saudi Chinese Investment Forum, 35 bilateral economic cooperation agreements were signed (Aboudouh, 2022). Almost a quarter of all Saudi Arabia’s oil goes to China. In 2022, Saudi Arabia surpassed Russia as the largest exporter of oil to China. In early 2023, however, it came slightly next to Russia in providing oil supplies to China (*Global Times*, 2023b).

In March 2023, Saudi Arabia was granted the status of dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – a political and security organization created in Eurasia in 2001 as a counterweight to Western influence. A dialogue partner is the first step toward full membership (*Reuters*, 2023). In the Saudi–China Business Forum held in Beijing in August 2023, Saudi and Chinese entities signed 12 agreements related to infrastructure development and financing, worth \$1.33 billion (Lucente, 2023c).

The UAE is a geopolitical asset for China's energy security and is the route through which two-thirds of Chinese trade with Africa, the Middle East, and Europe goes (Calabrese, 2022). Financial, infrastructure, and industrial cooperation gained momentum after the Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed in 2012 (Katzman, 2021: 21).

In 2022, China became the top UAE trading partner as the value of the non-oil trade reached \$72 billion. And since 2021, the UAE has become China's "number one" Arab and Gulf trading partner (Essaid, 2023a). Thus, the UAE now surpasses Saudi Arabia which in 2020 was China's top trading partner with a total volume of \$67 billion (Shaer, 2022). In August of 2023, the Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC) expanded its jet fuel network with the establishment of 14 airports in China (Essaid, 2023a). China is building and operating a container terminal in Abu Dhabi (Kurilla, 2023: 13).

Sino-GCC relations include a military dimension. With recent friction in their relations with the US, both Saudi Arabia and UAE see China as a strategic asset (Abu Shanif, 2022). Biden's intent to rejoin JCPA added more fuel to both countries' suspicions that the US is no longer a reliable security guarantor (as will be explained further below). Although retrenchment from the Middle East is more rhetoric than reality, it proved to be a major factor in moving both Saudi Arabia and the UAE closer to China. Both countries' refusal to condemn Russia for invading Ukraine and Saudi Arabia's rejection of US appeals to increase oil supplies during the crisis exacerbated the rift in the relationship. Loud protests by both Saudi Arabia and UAE were aired when the Senate Judiciary Committee passed with a wide bipartisan margin (17:4) the No Oil Producing and Exporting Cartels Act (NOPEC) in 2022. This legislation is an old bill introduced continuously in Congress since the beginning of the twenty-first century and was never enacted into law. Its goal is to protect American consumers from rising oil prices by removing state immunity to allow lawsuits against OPEC under US anti-trust laws (Gilchrist, 2022).

In this context of relations with the US, the Saudi and Emirati military relations with China represent a balancing act (Abu Shanif, 2022). In fact, in the case of Saudi Arabia, this dynamic dates back decades earlier. A case in point is the \$1 billion-intermediate range ballistic missiles deal which was concluded between SA and China in the mid-1980s, even before diplomatic relations were established. That deal can only be understood against the backdrop of the US Congressional veto over Saudi plans to purchase updated F-15 planes (Abu Shanif, 2022). The same dynamic can easily be detected when Congress opposed the sale of the F-35 fighter jet to the UAE. The latter froze the deal upon Congressional objections that the sale may potentially compromise US sensitive military technology (Abu Shanif, 2022).

The US claims and Saudi Arabia denies that China heavily assists Saudi Arabia in developing ballistic missiles on Saudi soil (Shaer, 2022). In 2022, China signed an agreement to assist Saudi Arabia's first drone factory (Gering, 2023).

Technical cooperation between China and the UAE, especially in strategic sectors, has been closely monitored by the US (Abu Shanif, 2022). In February 2023, China announced a deal signed with the UAE to sell the Chinese L15 light attack and combat trainer jet (Xuanzun, 2023).

China simultaneously keeps a partnership with both GCC states and Iran. At a time when China has been keen to deepen its relations with the GCC, it continues to see Iran as a strategic asset, serving as a check against US domination in the Gulf region. The Sino-Iranian 25-year-Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed in 2021 (Pantucchi, 2023). The relationship with Iran is not void of tension, however. China had not shied away from expressing reservations on Iran's accession to the Shanghai agreement. Iran has its qualms concerning both the Uyghurs and what it perceives to be China's "debt-trap diplomacy" involving development projects supported by China (Pantucchi, 2023). Iran loudly protested the Chinese-GCC Joint Statement which supported the UAE position on the Strait of Hormoz islands (Marks, 2022). However, the Iranian president's visit to China, immediately thereafter was followed by the Chinese-mediated Saudi-Iranian deal. Clearly, China is keen to strike a critical balance between deepening its relations with the GCC states and courting Tehran. Iran's crude oil shipment to China tripled from 2020 to 2023 reaching almost 1.1 million barrels per day by mid-2023 (Lucente, 2023b).

But China seeks to strike a critical balance between courting Iran as a check against US domination and letting its relationship with Tehran become a cause of bruising tension with Washington. However, it is Israel that is walking a tight rope in its relationship with China. Although China is the second largest trading partner for Israel, after the US (Macaron, 2023), the Sino-Israeli relations have been largely a military one from the outset. In the twenty-first century, the US has played a crucial role in derailing relations on more than one occasion. In 2000, Israel was forced to cancel an agreement providing China with the Phalcon Airborne Early Warning and Control system. In 2005, defense relations between the two countries were officially severed when the US accused Israel of upgrading the IAI's Harpy assault UAVs, originally sold to China in the late 1990s. Israel claimed that the weapons were shipped from China for maintenance. But the US insisted Israel should not send them back and demanded that Israel provide the US with full details of its defense technology transfers and that Israeli defense officials involved must be fired. Moreover, the US demanded that Israel signs a memorandum of understanding stipulating that any defense and dual-use exports to China must be approved in advance by the US (Evron, 2013: 512). However,



Chinese interest in maintaining relations with Israel continued. On the one hand, and to Washington's deep consternation, Israel, in 2018, granted the Shanghai International Port Group a 25-year-contract to operate the Haifa port (Rumley, 2022: 7). The port was opened in 2021 and was described as "significantly larger than Israel's three international ports and supports large shipping vessels capable of carrying more than 18,000 containers" (Kurilla, 2023: 13). On the other hand, China heavily invested in Israel technology sector, "including the acquisition of Israeli firms" (Ahmadi, 2024), and remained interested in technology transfer from Israel, which, post-2005, has been classified as civilian (Evron, 2013: 516). China has shown interest, among other things, in Israeli communication technology – a particular concern to the US. The Sino–Israeli ties in the technological field was the reason why the US launched in late 2022 the US–Israel Strategic Technology Dialogue (US–Israel Strategic Technology Dialogue, 2023). Against Beijing's frequent warnings (Ahmadi, 2024), Israel yielded to US pressure and tightened its oversight over foreign investment, especially in the field of technology (Xie, 2022). Israel's clear "prioritization" of relations with the US created tension in Sino–Israeli relations (Hussein, 2022), thus liberating China from its strenuous efforts to strike a critical balance between deepening relations with Israel and its longtime support of Palestinians. As will be explained further below, in previous Israeli aggressions against Gaza, Beijing's position was far more reserved than its explicit condemnation of the Israeli brutal campaign against Palestinians after October 7 (Ahmadi, 2024).

But the Sino–Middle East relations are not confined to military sales. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, insisting it is not for combat operations but rather for escort task forces (Cheng, 2017: 5). The route through the Gulf of Aden is important for the Chinese economy. More than 1,200 Chinese merchant ships and 40% of all Chinese imports of goods and raw materials pass annually through the Gulf of Aden. It is also an important sea route for China's oil, grain, and container transportation (Cheng, 2017: 5). China has been severely affected by piracy off the coast of Somalia. Somali pirates took Chinese hostages in 2008 and captured two Chinese vessels. Since 2009, the Chinese military Navy vessels patrol the Gulf of Aden to protect against piracy (Mansour, 2016: 212). While China was engaged in anti-piracy activities from 2008, it was not until 2010 that such engagement took a multilateral shape (Cheng, 2017: 5–7).

Chinese Navy vessels docked in the UAE in 2010 and in Iran in 2014. In 2013, China sent a Navy warship to help escort forces removing Syria's chemical weapons (Goldstein, 2015: 164). China deployed its vessels to the Mediterranean to carry out non-combatant missions and evacuate Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011, and later to Yemen to evacuate more than 600 Chinese citizens and 200 citizens from 15 other countries (Cheng, 2017: 5).

Reports in 2023 that the construction was resumed in the Chinese military base in the UAE caused alarm in Washington. The construction was halted in 2021 when the US voiced objection (Porter, 2023).

## US–Chinese Relations

In the last two decades, a new China consensus has emerged in Washington. It marks a clear shift from the consensus of the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Back then, the US sense of its own invincibility was the basis of a paradigm that argued for incorporating China into the world economy and granting it the status of the most favored nations (Zhu, 2005: 14–15). It was the height of the neo-liberal era, in which US national interest was defined in economic terms. Incorporating the huge Chinese market, it was argued, would lead to dramatic political changes in the Chinese regime (Yang, 2010: 433–435). Instead, such neo-liberal policies rather instilled the seeds for dramatic changes in the US political system; those policies in the Clinton and W. Bush years pillaged the wealth of many American communities, thus engendering discontent – now exploited by white nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, two wars, a financial crisis, and a constant steep rise in the military budget have eaten away discretionary spending. Such predicaments severely affected investments in areas crucial to simultaneously meet the needs of ravaged communities at home and keep up with dynamic changes on the world stage. All the while, China's global power has grown consistently stronger and more assertive, and the Chinese political system has remained largely the same (Campbell and Ratner, 2018: 64–65). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the relative decline of US global primacy leads to a new paradigm grounded in a sense of insecurity. Such a paradigm is the new Washington Consensus, which perceives China as a major challenge to US security and interests and the only global power with the means to constitute a threat (Sanders, 2021). The threat of China, from a US perspective, is twofold: challenging the US-crafted world order and the technological advancement challenging US supremacy (National Security Strategy, 2022: 23).

Because it is largely bipartisan, the consensus regarding China enables Congress to be highly active in setting policy toward China, under Democrats and Republicans alike. For example during Trump's last two years alone, the laws passed by the 116th Congress (2019–2020) and related to China included those on Hong Kong (P.L. 116-76; P.L. 116-77; P.L. 116-149), Uyghurs (P.L. 116-145), Tibet (P.L. 116-260), Taiwan (P.L. 116-135; P.L. 116-260), fentanyl (P.L. 116-114), communications networks (P.L. 116-124), and foreign issuers of securities (P.L. 116-222) (*Congressional Research Service Report*, 2021).

Under Biden, Congress continued to play an important role. In the 117th Congress (2021–2022) alone, 306 pieces of bills were introduced, whether as

separate legislation or as part of authorization and/or appropriation bills (Govtrack.us, 2023). They included topics ranging from combating Confucian institutes which are seen as a “foreign influence” (Rogin, 2018), stronger military presence in the Indo-Pacific region, telecommunications (McCartney, 2021), banning TikTok on government computers (Basu and Cali, 2023), semiconductors (*Strait Times*, 2022), and chip producers’ subsidies (Bade, 2021). The bipartisan consensus in Congress seeks to stop businesses from “compromising US security” by outsourcing technology to China and ensure America’s technological superiority by forcing US businesses to choose between receiving government funds and conducting business in China (Bade, 2021). The most important law passed by Congress, under Biden, was the CHIPS Act (P.L. 117-167), which seeks to strengthen US technological competitiveness through investments in US semiconductor manufacturing (*Congressional Research Service Report*, 2023).

As for the executive branch, the Biden administration, since taking office, has made clear that China represents “America’s most consequential geopolitical challenge” (National Security Strategy, 2022: 11). The National Security Strategy makes clear that the US will continue to “write the rules of the road and shape the relationships that govern global affairs” using all its diplomatic, economic, technological, and security resources “in every region” of the world (National Security Strategy, 2022: 22). In fact, the perceived Chinese challenge undergirds Biden’s both domestic and foreign policy.

To counter China, the Biden administration put forward a plan to “invest, align and compete” (National Security Strategy, 2022: 24). In a bleak comparison, Blinken implored that his country “used to rank first in the world in research and development as a proportion of our GDP – now we’re ninth. Meanwhile, China has risen from eighth place to second” (Blinken, 2022). Therefore, putting America’s house in order first was the logical starting point for the administration. The White House successfully passed through Congress both the \$550 billion “Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act” in 2021 (Updated Factsheet, 2021), and the \$370 billion Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 (Inflation Reduction Act Guidebook, 202 (2023)). The CHIPS and Science Act may also be seen through the prism of putting the American house in order. It is a \$52 billion industrial plan to bolster research and semiconductor production in the US and give supply chains resiliency. Moreover, it restricts China’s chip manufacturing industry, depriving it of the computing power necessary for large-scale AI training (Li, 2023).

Using his powers according to the International Emergency Economic Act and the National Emergencies Act, Biden issued, in August 2023, Executive Order 14105 (Presidential Documents, 2023) to direct the Treasury Department to create a program that would require notification by US investments into countries “of concern” and approval for sensitive technologies such as quantum information

technologies, semiconductors, and certain types of artificial intelligence (Outbound Investment Program, 2023). However, to Washington's consternation, Huawei – which has been under US sanctions since the Trump era – released its new smartphone in September 2023. Huawei's new smartphone contains a chip both designed and manufactured in China, thus demonstrating that the US controls and sanctions failed to achieve their goal (Dou, 2023).

The BRI is considered by Washington to be a Chinese scheme to undermine US interests in general and the Middle East in particular. In his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Michael Kurilla, Commander of the Central Command (CENTCOM) described the BRI as “a strategic lever to supplant U.S. leadership in the region under the guise of benign economic initiatives and broadening security relationships. Of the 21 countries comprising the CENTCOM area of responsibility, 19 have Belt and Road Initiative agreements with China” (Kurilla, 2023: 12).

In response to the BRI, the US launched in the 2022 G7 Summit the Partnership for Global Investment Initiative (PGII) (Savoy and McKewon, 2022). PGII is, clearly, perceived, in Washington, as a private investment alternative to the BRI's “heavy reliance on the Chinese public sector” (Losos and Fetter, 2022). However, the PGII was a scaled-back repackaging of the “B3W” version launched a year earlier.<sup>4</sup> The \$ 40 trillion-15-year ambitious B3W was an overly ambitious infrastructure investment. However, the war in Ukraine and global inflation affected the proposal, reducing it to \$600 billion. However, energy security was added to the four priority areas of B3W investment – namely digital connectivity, climate change, health security, and gender equality (Losos and Fetter, 2022). During the 2023 G20 Summit, the India–Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was unveiled. It is a multinational port and railway agreement that would link the Middle East and South Asia – yet another project of the PGII to counter China's BRI (Bose, 2023). This time, however, it is to challenge China specifically in the Middle East. It seeks to establish a sea and rail network linking India to Europe via the Middle East. Trade will travel by sea from India to the UAE, then through a rail route via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and on to Haifa in Israel. The goods will then travel again by sea to Europe ((Pastricha, 2023). The IMEC is a reminder that Arab states are not interested in taking part in the Sino–American tension; there is clearly a gap between the US and the Gulf states' perception of such projects. While the US envisioned the IMEC as a vehicle to counter China's BRI, Gulf states perceive both projects as manifestations of an emerging multipolar world order “in which they can balance ties with both China and the West to maximize their own gains” (Merchant, 2023). As will be explained further below, IMEC is yet another example of both the notion of small networks the US seeks to depend on in the region to counter China and the perils of bypassing the Palestinian question.

## The Middle East Through the China Lens

In all documents published by the Biden administration,<sup>5</sup> the main theater of the rivalry with China is the Indo-Pacific region. But the National Security Strategy makes clear the challenge posed by China has “significant global dimensions” (National Security Strategy, 2022: 11).

Regarding China’s influence in the Middle East, Washington’s concerns are no different than such influence elsewhere in the world; namely the rise of China’s economic and military assertiveness, changing the world order, and technological competition jeopardizing US supremacy. In the Middle East, however, where the US has been heavily involved for decades, minor changes in US policy have led to tectonic results in the last decade. US policymakers’ definition of US interests in the Middle East has been shifting since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, those interests were defined as protecting Israel, preventing soviet domination, and energy security. After the Cold War, the anti-Soviet domination was replaced by preventing a hegemon – global or regional – from threatening US interests (Ashford, 2018: 127–148). It was through this lens that the neo-conservatives carried out their plan of “regime change.” However, the Iraqi debacle scaled back their project. After the Bush years, and despite intervention in both Libya and Syria under Obama, the pivot to Asia became the Washington mantra.

But, in concrete terms the US is still thoroughly present in the Middle East, for it is important to remember precisely in what way the US has been involved and influential in the region; Unlike China, America’s major influence in the Middle East is grounded foremost in its military and security presence. Among others, the US has radar bases in Turkey and Israel, Air Force facilities in Kuwait, Turkey (Incirlik Air Base), and the UAE. It has military installations such as Al Udeid air base in Qatar, home to CENTCOM’s headquarters and where thousands of US personnel are stationed. The Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain. Service members at these facilities train allied militaries, support campaigns against ISIS, and protect trade routes (Ashford, 2018: 127–148). US military assistance to the region constitutes “more than 50 percent of total military aid globally” and US forces in the Middle East have been fairly “steady at just less than 50,000 deployed troops” (Kaye et al., 2021: 15). As of 2023, more than a hundred thousand troops and security contractors are stationed in the region (Gering, 2023). During the same year, the US sent to the Gulf region fighter jets and a Navy destroyer followed by 3,000 Navy personnel and Marines (Macaron, 2023). US bureaucracy, especially at the State Department, the Pentagon, and the intelligence still devote considerable resources to the Middle East (DePetris, 2019). Under Obama, the US intervened in Libya. This US military presence is what makes the US an important strategic ally to several Arab allies, even in times of bilateral tension.

Given the above-mentioned heavy presence, the “pivot to Asia,” which emerged under Obama, was never meant to be a military withdrawal from the Middle East. The shift was rather in counterterrorism tactics from heavy to light footprint, through small “special operations forces, with standoff strike capabilities” (Ashford, 2018: 134). Ironically, the rhetoric led to a major shift in Gulf states’ calculations moving those countries closer to both Israel and China. For Gulf states, guaranteeing their security in exchange for energy security is at the core of the strategic alliance with the US. Both the “pivot to Asia” rhetoric and the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 were perceived by Gulf states as US failure to consider their security concerns (Feierstein et al., 2022: 6).

However, the “pivot to Asia” was not the only reason behind the simmering tension between the US and Gulf states since the beginning of the Obama years. The administration’s policies toward the Arab Spring in 2011 were seen in the Gulf as abandoning longtime allies, especially Mubarak, and that they would be next when it comes to US rhetorical pressure on democracy and human rights (Feierstein et al., 2022: 6). Trump’s response to the Houthi attack in 2019 on Saudi major oil field and facilities was perceived in Saudi Arabia as lacking “resolve” (Krane and Finley, 2019). The Biden administration’s decision in 2021 to reverse Trump’s designation of Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization was perceived in the Gulf as emboldening Iran and “turning a blind eye to Houthis repeated attacks” (Feierstein et al., 2022: 7). US response to Houthi missile and drone strike on Abu Dhabi in 2022 was perceived by the UAE as too little too late (Ulrichsen, 2023). It is in this context that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE envision military relations with China. However, Arab states “have been explicit in warning U.S. interlocutors that they will avoid being drawn into a U.S.-China competition for influence in the region, at the same time reiterating their preference for maintaining close ties to the US” (Feierstein et al., 2022: 7). In other words, Arab states are in no mood to get entangled in Sino-American tension and are not abandoning close associations with the US either.

### **Doing More with Less**

The Biden administration’s strategy in the ME, as elsewhere, is based on identifying key allies in each region to carry out Washington’s bidding both politically and militarily. Two such groupings have been formed, namely the I2U2, and the Negev Forum.

The I2U2 (the two “I”s stand for Israel and India and the two “U”s stand for the US and the UAE) is designed to be the center pillar of the US new strategy in the ME. National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, articulated the administration’s objective, by explicitly making the comparison with the Quad. “We think,” he said, that the “I2U2 can become a feature of the broader region, just as the Quad has become a central pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States”

(Lakshman, 2022). It is important to remember that the logic behind this nexus was envisioned before the Saudi–Iran rapprochement. It rested on concerns Israel, the US, and the UAE have regarding Iran, and the concerns of both the US and India regarding China. Consolidating the relationship between UAE and Israel is a key component of the US strategy to deescalate tensions in the region. As uncontroversial as the agenda of the first meeting seemed (focusing on energy and food security), the presence of India explains the strategy. India, the UAE, and Israel would work together with the US against China’s nexus with Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. The US sees an economically and technologically strong India as a counterweight to both Russia and China in terms of providing technological and military supplies for other countries (Haqqani and Pande, 2023). Bringing India into the equation is meant, also, to lure Israel away from China, denying the latter access to Israeli technology, by replacing the Chinese with Indian market and investments.

However, the I2U2 has its own problems. The Ukraine War served as a rude wake-up call to Washington. All three members of the I2U2 had taken positions on the war closer to that of China, than the US. Besides, India enters the “Middle East Quad” cautiously guarding its strong bilateral relations with Iran; India and Iran have similar concerns in Afghanistan and a growing relationship despite US sanctions. More so, neither India nor the UAE joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US coalition to police the Red Sea upon the Houthi attacks on shipping in response to Israel’s war on Gaza after October 7, 2023 (Stewart et al., 2023).

The uncertain fate of the IMEC – another project based roughly on the same I2U2 network (albeit adding both Jordan and Saudi Arabia) – is yet another wake-up call, this time, for the perils of bypassing the Palestinian issue. A crucial element for the project to work was a reliable link between Saudi Arabia and Israel and the US was pushing hard on Saudi–Israeli normalization at the time when the IMEC was announced. (Pastricha, 2023). The Israeli aggression against Gaza put the Saudi–Israeli normalization and thus the IMEC on “cold ice” (Pastricha, 2023). Bahrain’s parliament declared ending all economic ties with Israel and sent the Israeli Ambassador home (Whitson, 2023). The perils of bypassing Palestine were also manifest when US Arab allies, including the two major Red Sea powers; Egypt and Saudi Arabia did not sign on to Operation Prosperity Guardian, despite US pressure (Solomon, 2024). Partly because of what they perceive as a lackluster US response to Houthi attacks on them, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which fought against the group for years, had no interest in a renewed major operation against it. More important, and since “the primary goal of the American coalition was to protect the safety of shipping through Israel’s ports,” both Egypt and Saudi Arabia did not want to be seen as siding against Palestine (Solomon, 2024).

More generally, the aftermath of October 7 made it abundantly clear that China has not only become a major *political* player in the Middle East but also one that is free of its previously cautious balance between supporting Palestinians and deepening ties with Israel. This time, China strongly called for an immediate ceasefire at the UN Security Council. In a multi-country tour that did not include Israel, the Chinese–Middle East envoy, framed the situation as “part of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict” rather than an isolated crisis (McCarthy and Chang, 2023). The head of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s West Asian and North African Affairs Department visited Iran to discuss the war (McCarthy and Chang, 2023). China “refused to explicitly condemn Hamas” which it never “designated as a terrorist organization” (Ahmadi, 2024). Nor did it condemn the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea (Xijin, 2022).

Just as in the case of Ukraine, the post-October-7 war against Gaza demonstrated that the positions of Arab states were, at least rhetorically, closer to that of China, not the US. During the war, the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia visited Beijing, not Washington, to discuss the situation. In Beijing, they called for an immediate ceasefire (Moritsugu, 2023). More so, amidst the war, the first meeting of the China–Iran–Saudi Arabia joint committee took place in Beijing. The three parties expressed commitment to the full implementation of the Saudi–Iranian agreement and called for “an immediate ceasefire in Gaza” (*Global Times*, 2023c).

Militarily, the US strategy is also based on working through allies. Instead of a “security guarantor,” the US now sees itself as a “security integrator” which aims at integrating US allies “into a framework of operations, activities, investments, and initiatives that will ensure sufficient regional security to protect (US) vital national interests” (Kurilla, 2023: 12). The National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2022 explains that the US will support coalitions in the region to “ensure maritime security and improve collective intelligence and warning” (National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 2022: 15). In the longer term, the US intends to create a “Middle East NATO,” the goals of which are spelled out in the National Defense Strategy. The US seeks to

establish a network of air and missile defense capabilities across the Middle East to facilitate greater cooperation while bolstering defense through a layered approach. Ongoing normalization efforts between Israel and key Arab states provide additional opportunities to strengthen regional air defenses given shared missile and Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (UAS) threats. (National Defense Strategy, 2022: 77)

The military component takes center stage in the Negev Forum for Regional Cooperation, officially announced in November 2022. Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco, the UAE, and the US were represented in the inauguration and the Forum is to be



open to future regional players to join (Blinken, 2023). The Forum's goal is to strengthen information sharing among members and regional military cooperation with CENTCOM (Essaid, 2023b). However, the Negev Forum is yet another example of why bypassing the Palestinian issue is not a viable option for US strategy in the region. Although three meetings of the Forum's working groups were already held, the foreign Ministerial meeting scheduled to take place in Morocco in March 2023 was repeatedly put off due to Israeli escalations against the Palestinians in the occupied territories. (Bousmid, 2023). It was later announced that the meeting was canceled altogether (Kasraoui, 2023).

All the while, both the I2U2 and the Negev Forum do not help alleviate the spiral of mutual suspicion between the US and some Middle East states. That the US is laser-focused on China distracts its policymakers away from a Middle East that is already used to heavy US involvement. Such a distraction feeds into Middle East countries' perception of Washington's unreliability, thus leading them to double down on their ties with China – thus adding to Washington's suspicion of the intentions of both Chinese and Middle Eastern countries.

## Conclusion

Faced with a growing Chinese influence, the Biden administration sees the Middle East through the prism of its competition with China. However, both regional dynamics and US domestic politics are moving away from administration preferences. Middle East countries have no interest in siding with either the US or China. The aftermath of October 7 made it sufficiently clear that Arab Israeli networks that bypass the Palestinian issue are unsustainable as a US strategy. Creating networks, such as the I2U2 and the Negev Forum, while ignoring Palestine, risks frequent setbacks with every new crisis in the occupied territories. It also complicates other arrangements by Middle East states. For example, the US efforts toward a Saudi–Israeli normalization agreement necessarily derail the fragile Saudi–Iranian rapprochement (Iran International, 2023).

However, no assessment of US policy in the region is possible without adequate attention to US domestic politics. The rise of white nationalism raises the specter of a Trump or Trump-like new president in the 2024 elections and beyond, suggesting that such cooperation with allies may prove to be the future aberration rather than the rule (Sutter, 2022). A fact that adds to Middle East countries' apprehensions.

More so, the strong bipartisanship which exists in China may prove to stop at the Middle East edge. In Congress, a coalition of progressive Democrats and far-right Freedom Caucus Republicans has emerged on several Middle East issues, including Middle East relations with China. For example, in 2019,

House members co-sponsored a Joint Resolution calling on the Trump administration to remove US armed forces from hostilities in Yemen. Co-sponsors were progressive Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA), and two members of the House Freedom Caucus-Reps. Kenneth Buck (R-CO) and Andrew Biggs (R-AZ). This coalition of progressive and far-right lawmakers was successful in garnering broad support for the Resolution that quickly passed the House on a vote of 248–177, with 18 Republicans joining 230 Democrats. The language of the Resolution was introduced in the Senate as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and took two years to become law, finally passing as an amendment in the FY2022 NDAA (Khanna, 2021). Similar dynamics occurred a year later concerning the No War Against Iran Act, when particularly progressive and far-right members challenged the president’s war powers. It passed on a vote of 236:166 (Adragna and Everett, 2023). Upon news that the \$23 billion sale of F35 was an incentive for the UAE to sign the Abraham Accords, a coalition in the Senate moved to pass a Resolution to block the deal on the grounds of sensitive technology, obviously out of concerns related to the UAE relations with China (Homan and Lantis, 2022: 852). The Resolution was rejected on a vote of 49:47. Another Resolution was written to block the sale of up to 18 MQ-9B drones to the UAE on the same grounds. This Resolution was also rejected by a vote of 50:46 (Szuba, 2020). Although both these resolutions failed, the small margin of votes in each is a case in point, for change in Congressional action is often incremental. That such coalitions will increasingly become more frequent in the future or remain few and formed on an ad hoc basis is an open question.

## Notes

1. The GSI was first proposed by China in 2022, based on the principle of “indivisible security”; the insecurity in one country is insecurity for all.
2. Tension between the US and Arab states will be explained further on pages 28 and 29.
3. White nationalism is a movement with deep roots in American history. The self-described “White Nationalists” believe national belonging should be based on race. For them, the US is a white Christian nation, and they favor the complete separation of races into separate states. Their goal is an all-white state. While some White nationalists prefer a white ethno-state in the US northwest, others want American non-whites to go back to where they came from. Despite their denial of any supremacist ideas and claiming theirs is an identitarian ideology, the literature of the various groups and organizations of the movement is fraught with racist and supremacist ideas (Hawley, 2017) : 13–15).
4. B3W stands for Build Back Better World.
5. These documents are: Interim National Security Strategy, Indo-Pacific Strategy, National Security Strategy, and National Defense Strategy.

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