

**CHINA'S GROWING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:  
REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS AND US POLICY**

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***Abstract***

*China's growing involvement in the Middle East has garnered significant attention from policymakers and scholars alike. As China expands its economic, political, and military presence in the region and on the global stage, it is reshaping the traditional geopolitical dynamics and challenging the influence of established powers, particularly the United States. This article seeks to make an analytical x-ray of China's evolving role in the Middle East, analyzing its motivations, strategies, and implications for U.S. policy and regional stability. Through a wide-ranging review of literature and analysis of recent developments, it is argued that China's engagement in the Middle East is driven by the idea of mutual cooperation, its energy security needs, economic interests, and strategic objectives, and that it poses both opportunities and challenges for regional dynamics and particularly for U.S. interests. It concludes amongst other that, in response, the United States must adapt its policies to effectively manage China's growing presence in the Middle East while safeguarding its own strategic interests and promoting stability in the region.*

***Keywords:*** *China, Middle East, Geopolitics, U.S. Policy, Regional Stability.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The rise of China as a contending world power has for long been foretold. As in a quote famously attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte as saying “China is a sleeping giant, let her sleep. For when she wakes up, she will shake the world”. This is undoubtedly a pointer to China’s great role in global affairs as evident in the role of China in global affairs today. For instance, it goes without gainsaying that China is the second largest, if not the largest, economy in the world, the Chinese population is evidently the largest or second largest in the world and so forth. With a population which is clearly an asset rather than a liability, China has been able to galvanize its human resource and has put it to good use.

The Chinese economy has clearly shown resilience over the years. Just in recent times, right after Covid19 devastated the global economy, with China not being exempted, the Chinese economy rapidly bounced back showing steady growth, at a time when other economies were struggling with minuses on their growth margins. The continued support and progression of the famous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of the Chinese government, which is billed to build a network of economic activities from Beijing to the United Kingdom leveraging the old silk road, showed no sign of slowing down as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIDB) was on-hand to provide needed funding to the Chinese and other governments across the corridor of this lofty initiative.

These and more evidence the reality that China is indeed a power to contend with on the global stage. This show of strength and spread of reach through foreign policy by the Chinese government has also been seen in China’s relations with the Middle East. Besides the BRI and other bilateral and multilateral relations and engagements China has had with governments in the Middle East, China has also ensured it tries to bring about peaceful resolution of long-standing feuds amongst governments in the region such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen, Syria, Turkey etcetera. The mediation role of China in all these states gave a boost to its bilateral economic relations with them which has in recent times snowballed into a more robust membership of BRICS further concretizing and solidifying these relations, Imam (2024).

It is undoubtedly that the Middle East region has long been a focal point of global geopolitics due to its strategic location, vast energy resources, and complex security dynamics. The Chinese have also in recent years, expanded their reach and made inroads into the region as

stated earlier. Notwithstanding the above, China's expanding presence in the Middle East, characterized by increased trade, investment, and diplomatic engagement, has raised questions about its intentions and implications for U.S. interests and overall regional stability. This article provides an overview of China's evolving role in the Middle East, examines its motivations and strategies, and assesses the implications for regional dynamics and U.S. policy.

## **2. CHINA'S MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES**

China's engagement in the Middle East is driven by a combination of economic, strategic, and security interests. At the core of China's drive is energy security. As the world's largest energy consumer, China relies heavily on imported oil and gas, much of which transits through the Middle East region. Therefore, ensuring a stable and reliable energy supply is thus of paramount concern for Beijing. In pursuit of this existential objective, China has sought to deepen economic ties with Middle Eastern countries, investing in energy infrastructure and forging energy partnerships.

In addition to energy security, China sees the Middle East as a crucial component of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Foremost because the BRI is a rejuvenation of the Old Silk Road, which is geographically across the corridors of the Middle East region. The BRI aims to enhance connectivity and promote economic development across Eurasia through a network of infrastructure projects. Several Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have embraced the BRI, viewing it as an opportunity to attract Chinese investment and stimulate economic growth. China, in turn, has been eager to leverage the region's geostrategic significance to advance its BRI objectives.

In addition to the above, China's engagement in the Middle East serves its broader strategic objectives, including expanding its influence and enhancing its global standing as a contending world power. By cultivating political and economic partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, China seeks to bolster its diplomatic clout and counterbalance the influence of traditional powers, particularly the United States, especially in the face of changing alliances and power dynamics in global politics. China has also sought to deepen security cooperation with select Middle Eastern states, such as Iran and Pakistan, to advance its strategic interests and counter perceived security threats, Blanchard (2018).

### **3. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL DYNAMICS AND U.S. POLICY**

China's growing presence in the Middle East has significant implications for regional dynamics and U.S. policy. On the one hand, China's economic investments and infrastructure projects offer potential benefits for Middle Eastern countries, including job creation, economic growth, and improved infrastructure. Besides the technological and infrastructural advancement, China's emphasis on non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states and respect for state sovereignty resonates with most governments in the region and around the world, providing an alternative to the interventionist policies of Western powers, Hanieh (2017).

On the other hand, China's deepening involvement in the Middle East raises concerns about its impact on regional stability and security. China's strategic partnerships with states like Iran and its growing military presence in the region have fueled anxieties among U.S. allies, particularly Israel, who fear that China's rise could upset the traditional balance of power. Moreover, China's reluctance to condemn 'human rights abuses' and its support for 'authoritarian' regimes in the Middle East have drawn criticism from Western countries and human rights advocates, Kamel (2017).

From a U.S. perspective, China's expanding role in the Middle East presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, China's economic engagement in the region offers potential avenues for cooperation on issues of mutual interest, such as counterterrorism and energy security. However, China's growing influence also poses challenges to U.S. interests, particularly in terms of maintaining regional stability, protecting allies, and preserving access to energy resources, Daojiong (2016).

### **4. CHINA'S ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

China's economic engagement in the Middle East has expanded significantly over the past two decades, driven by its growing demand for energy resources and its broader economic interests. The Middle East holds some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, making it a critical region for China's energy security. To secure access to these vital resources, China has pursued extensive energy cooperation with Middle Eastern countries through investment deals, long-term supply contracts, and infrastructure projects, Raffaello (2018).

One notable example of China's economic presence in the Middle East is its investment in energy infrastructure. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been involved in major energy projects across the region, including oil and gas exploration, pipeline construction, and refinery operations. For instance, Chinese companies have invested in the development of oil fields in countries such as Iraq and Iran, as well as the construction of oil and gas pipelines in countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Katz (2016).

In addition to energy cooperation, China has sought to diversify its economic engagement in the Middle East beyond the energy sector. This has involved expanding trade ties, promoting investment in non-energy sectors, and supporting the development of special economic zones and industrial parks. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a key framework for enhancing economic connectivity and promoting infrastructure development in the region. Several Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Oman, and Djibouti, have signed cooperation agreements with China under the BRI, signaling their interest in leveraging Chinese investment to spur economic growth and modernize their infrastructure, Frédéric (2019).

Furthermore, China's economic engagement in the Middle East extends beyond bilateral relations to encompass regional economic institutions and multilateral initiatives. China has become an increasingly important partner for organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League, providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and infrastructure funding. China's participation in multilateral forums, such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), reflects its desire to deepen economic cooperation and enhance its influence in the region, Justin (2017).

## **5. CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Beyond its economic interests, China also has strategic objectives driving its engagement in the Middle East. One of China's key strategic priorities is to safeguard its maritime trade routes and ensure the security of its energy imports, which transit through major maritime chokepoints in the Middle East, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. To protect its maritime interests, China has expanded its naval presence in the region, conducting naval patrols and participating in multinational maritime security operations, such as counter-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia.

Moreover, China's engagement in the Middle East is informed by its broader geopolitical ambitions, including its desire to counterbalance the influence of the United States and assert itself as a major global power. By cultivating political and economic partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, China aims to enhance its diplomatic clout and expand its sphere of influence beyond the Asia-Pacific region. China's support for multilateralism and its emphasis on non-interference in the internal affairs of other states resonate with some governments in the Middle East, providing an alternative to the interventionist policies of Western powers, Ray (2020).

Additionally, China views the Middle East as a key arena for advancing its security and counterterrorism objectives. China has expressed concerns about the spread of extremism and terrorism in the region, particularly in the context of its restive Xinjiang province, where it faces challenges from Uighur separatist groups. China has sought to enhance security cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, sharing intelligence, conducting joint counterterrorism exercises, and cooperating on border security measures. However, China's security engagement in the region has raised questions about its alignment with authoritarian regimes and its approach to human rights issues, particularly in countries such as Syria and Iran, Houda (2016).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

China's growing role in the Middle East represents a significant development in global geopolitics with far-reaching implications for regional dynamics and U.S. policy. China's role is however important to maintain balance of power and allow for the rise of alternatives in terms of dynamics of power brokers. As China continues to deepen its economic, political, and military ties with Middle Eastern countries, it is reshaping the traditional geopolitical landscape and challenging the dominance of established powers, particularly the United States. While China's engagement in the region offers potential benefits for regional development and stability, it also poses risks and uncertainties that must be carefully managed.

In response, the United States must adopt a nuanced and proactive approach to China's growing presence in the Middle East. This entails engaging with China on areas of common interest while also safeguarding U.S. strategic interests and promoting regional stability. Key priorities for U.S. policy include strengthening alliances, enhancing military cooperation, and promoting good governance and respect for human rights in the region. By doing so, the United States can

effectively manage the challenges posed by China's rise in the Middle East and uphold its position as a key player in the region's geopolitics.

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