

China's Expanding Influence in the Middle East: Economic, Diplomatic, and Geopolitical Dimensions

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Abstract

China's expanding influence in the Middle East has become a central element of its broader global strategy, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Following key events like October 7, 2023, China's influence has intensified, with a focus on strengthening economic ties with Middle Eastern countries through investments in energy, infrastructure, technology, and the digital economy. This approach is marked by projects such as the development of digital infrastructure, which align with China's vision of long-term economic integration in the region. This model offers a counterbalance to Western economic frameworks that come with political conditions. Additionally, China's commitment to non-interference in domestic affairs resonates with Middle Eastern governments, providing an attractive alternative to the West's ideologically charged involvement. As the U.S. grapples with shifting priorities, China's neutral and development-focused approach positions it as a pragmatic partner in the region. This paper explores China's growing role in the Middle East through economic partnerships, diplomatic mediation, energy cooperation, and military engagement, all of which contribute to a broader reshaping of the region's geopolitical and economic landscape.

Keywords: China; Middle East; Economic, Diplomatic; Geopolitical

Introduction

The Middle East has witnessed a profound shift in its geopolitical dynamics, with China emerging as a key player on the regional stage. Historically, the region has been heavily influenced by Western powers, particularly the United States, which has maintained strategic alliances and military presence. However, this long-standing dominance is now being challenged as China significantly increases its economic, diplomatic, and strategic footprint in the Middle East. This shift marks a major moment in the region's political and economic evolution, signaling the onset of a new era where the balance of power is gradually tilting toward multipolarity, with China playing an increasingly influential role.

At the heart of China's engagement in the Middle East is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a monumental global infrastructure development and investment project that spans across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the BRI aims to strengthen economic ties, improve trade routes, and foster long-term partnerships through infrastructure development, including railways, highways, ports, and energy pipelines. The Middle East, due to its strategic location as a crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe, occupies a central place within this initiative. China's expanding influence in the region is not merely a byproduct of economic interests but is intricately linked to broader geopolitical objectives, as China seeks to reshape global power structures and challenge the longstanding dominance of Western powers.

China's growing presence in the Middle East is multifaceted, extending beyond economic investments to include significant diplomatic and security engagements. Economically, China's demand for oil and gas, along with its ambitious plans to diversify its energy sources and trade routes, has led to deeper ties with key energy-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and the UAE. These relationships are built on mutual economic interests, with China offering Middle Eastern nations a pathway for infrastructure development and access to its vast consumer market. Diplomatic efforts, such as China's successful mediation between rival nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran, further enhance its influence in the region, positioning China as a neutral and pragmatic partner in contrast to Western powers that are often perceived as imposing political or ideological agendas.

Security-wise, China's involvement is more cautious but steadily growing. Through strategic arms deals, military cooperation, and discussions surrounding the establishment of military bases, China is positioning itself as a counterbalance to the traditional Western military presence in the region. This evolving role in security matters suggests that China's ambitions in the Middle East are not confined solely to economic and diplomatic spheres but are expanding to encompass a broader geopolitical vision.

This paper explores China's increasing influence in the Middle East, focusing on its economic investments, diplomatic initiatives, and security-related engagements. By examining these key aspects, this analysis aims to shed light on how China is reshaping the regional order and challenging the established power structures. Through exploration of its Belt and Road Initiative, energy cooperation, diplomatic successes, and military strategies, this paper highlights the shifting dynamics in the Middle East and the broader implications for global geopolitics. In doing so, it underscores the growing rivalry between China and the United States, with the Middle East emerging as a critical arena in this unfolding global power struggle.

Economic and Diplomatic Cooperation

China's growing economic presence in the Middle East is underpinned by its increasing demand for energy resources, its strategic investments in infrastructure, and its focus on advancing the digital economy. As a major importer of oil and natural gas, China has become a critical partner for Middle Eastern countries, many of which rely heavily on energy exports as a primary source of revenue. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has strategically invested in energy projects, including oil and gas pipelines, refineries, and storage facilities, strengthening energy cooperation with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. These investments help secure China's energy supply and contribute to the modernization of the Middle East's energy infrastructure, enhancing the region's long-term economic prospects (Yang, 2024).

Central to China's energy strategy in the Middle East is its BRI, through which it has invested significantly in energy infrastructure projects, including pipelines, refineries, and energy storage facilities. These investments serve a dual purpose: they secure China's energy imports while contributing to the modernization and diversification of the region's energy infrastructure. In countries like Iraq and Iran, China has played a key role in the construction of vital energy infrastructure, facilitating greater efficiency in oil extraction, storage, and distribution. This long-term commitment helps stabilize the energy markets and supports the development of the Middle East's energy sector, positioning China as a critical player in shaping the region's energy future (Shawamreh, 2025).

In addition to energy, China has made substantial investments in the region's physical infrastructure. Through the BRI, China has funded and constructed key projects such as railways, ports, highways, and airports, which are vital to the region's economic development and integration into global trade networks (Guo et al., 2022). By providing financing and technical expertise, China has enabled Middle Eastern countries to improve their infrastructure, thereby diversifying trade routes and opening new channels for economic growth. These investments are seen as mutually beneficial: Middle Eastern nations gain access to the capital and expertise needed to modernize their infrastructure, while China expands its economic footprint and establishes long-term trade relationships in a strategically important region (Clarke et al., 2023).

A significant aspect of China's approach to the Middle East is its emphasis on non-interference in the domestic affairs of its partners. This principle of non-interference resonates deeply with Middle Eastern nations that have historically been wary of foreign powers imposing political or ideological agendas. Unlike Western countries, particularly the U.S., which link economic assistance with demands for political or democratic reforms, China offers development-focused partnerships that are largely apolitical. This pragmatic approach enables China to position itself as a neutral partner, avoiding the kinds of political entanglements that often accompany Western aid and diplomacy. For Middle Eastern leaders, this is an attractive alternative to the traditional Western model, which can be seen as paternalistic or even coercive (Gupta, 2024).

One of the clearest demonstrations of China's growing diplomatic influence is its role as a mediator in regional conflicts. In March 2023, China brokered a historic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two long-standing rivals in the region. This agreement, which saw the restoration of diplomatic ties between the two countries, was a significant diplomatic achievement and highlighted China's ability to mediate in a region long dominated by deep geopolitical divides. By offering a platform for dialogue without imposing ideological demands, China demonstrated its ability to serve as a neutral force for stability in the Middle East. This success further cements

China's reputation as a diplomatic power capable of fostering regional peace and cooperation in a way that contrasts with the often divisive and interventionist approaches of Western powers.

China's economic and diplomatic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries is built on a foundation of mutual benefit, non-interference, and pragmatism. Through its strategic investments and diplomatic initiatives, China has positioned itself as a key partner in the Middle East's economic transformation while also fostering regional stability. This approach strengthens China's influence in the region and challenges the traditional Western dominance, offering an alternative model of international relations that prioritizes development and cooperation over political and ideological alignment (Chung, 2024).

Energy and Infrastructure Cooperation

Energy cooperation lies at the core of China's expanding influence in the Middle East, with the region serving as an indispensable supplier of oil and gas (Niu et al., 2024). China's surging demand for energy, fueled by its rapid industrialization and growing economy, has made it one of the largest consumers of global oil. As a result, China has forged strong ties with key oil-rich nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, becoming a vital partner in their energy sectors. These relationships not only ensure a steady energy supply for China but also create opportunities for mutual economic growth and geopolitical alignment (Rekhviashvili & Lang, 2024).

In turn, China's role as a reliable energy consumer benefits Middle Eastern nations by providing them with a steady and profitable market for their oil exports. China represents a critical alternative to the U.S. and European Union markets, where trade relationships are influenced by political considerations. In contrast, China's approach is largely apolitical, offering energy partnerships without the political conditions or demands for democratic reforms that often accompany Western energy agreements. This allows Middle Eastern nations to maintain greater sovereignty over their energy resources and diversify their strategic alliances, reducing their dependence on traditional Western partners (Chan et al., 2024).

As the United States recalibrates its foreign policy priorities, with a notable shift towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, Middle Eastern countries are increasingly looking to China as a strategic partner in both energy and infrastructure development. China's growing involvement in the Middle East offers these nations an opportunity to enhance their economic independence and leverage China's investments in vital infrastructure projects. From railways and ports to advanced energy networks, China's infrastructure investments are helping to shape the Middle East's future economic landscape, providing countries with the tools they need to modernize and integrate into global trade networks (Zheng & Zhang, 2023).

Through its energy and infrastructure cooperation, China is securing access to critical resources while establishing itself as an indispensable strategic partner for Middle Eastern nations (Shi, 2024). As China continues to deepen its ties with the region, its role as a key energy consumer and infrastructure investor will play an increasingly central role in shaping the Middle East's economic and geopolitical future. By offering an alternative to Western-led energy partnerships and providing the infrastructure needed for long-term development, China is positioning itself as a dominant force in the region's energy landscape, solidifying its influence and fostering durable, mutually beneficial alliances.

Additionally, China has emerged as a global leader in 5G technology, achieving extensive deployment and integration across its urban and rural landscapes. Its leadership in 5G deployment is underscored by its substantial share of global base stations and its strategic advancements in next-generation technologies. The nation's comprehensive approach positions it at the forefront of the global 5G landscape. (Kuik, 2025). Mobile first is a technical strategy that gives priority to the use of mobile communication platforms and technologies in the whole process of news production and dissemination; digitalizing authoritative and localized information is a content strategy that aims to increase the appeal of party newspapers' content to the citizens (Xu & He, 2022).

Challenge to U.S. Dominance

China's expanding influence in the Middle East marks a profound shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics, signaling the emergence of a more diversified and multipolar global order. Traditionally, the Middle East has been under the dominant influence of U.S. alliances, which have shaped the region's political and economic landscape for decades. However, in recent years, this U.S.-centric model has been challenged as China strengthens its ties

with key regional players, offering an alternative vision based on economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and non-interference in domestic politics (Chao, 2024).

A core aspect of China's growing presence in the Middle East is its neutral, development-driven approach to foreign policy, which stands in stark contrast to the U.S.'s ideologically motivated interventions. China's emphasis on mutual respect for sovereignty and a focus on economic development rather than political or military dominance resonates deeply with Middle Eastern countries. This model offers a welcome departure from Western-led foreign policy, which frequently ties economic aid or military support to political conditions or demands for democratic reforms. By offering partnerships that are primarily economic, China presents itself as a pragmatic, non-intrusive alternative to U.S. influence, making it an increasingly attractive partner for nations seeking to modernize their economies while maintaining political autonomy (Yu, 2024).

One of the clearest examples of this shift is the warming relations between China and traditionally adversarial nations in the region, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In March 2023, China successfully brokered a landmark diplomatic agreement between these two long-standing rivals, a move that underscored China's growing diplomatic clout and its ability to mediate complex regional disputes (Lin, 2023). This achievement highlighted China's emergence as a key diplomatic actor in the Middle East, further distancing itself from the often contentious and interventionist policies of the U.S. As countries in the region explore alternative pathways to security and economic prosperity, many are increasingly looking to China for both economic partnerships and diplomatic support, signaling a departure from their traditional reliance on U.S.-led alliances.

Although the scope of their military alignment is limited to facilitating China's challenge of US hegemony in Asia (Mastro, 2024), the rise of a multipolar world order intensifies rivalry between the U.S. and China and creates a new geopolitical landscape in which Middle Eastern countries have greater flexibility to diversify their foreign policies. No longer bound by a singular reliance on the U.S., these countries are capitalizing on the opportunity to strengthen relationships with China, Russia, and other emerging powers. In this increasingly fragmented global environment, Middle Eastern nations are seeking to balance their ties between traditional Western powers and new partners, thus reducing their vulnerability to shifts in U.S. policy and securing their strategic interests through a broader array of alliances (Ji, & Wu, 2024).

This evolving geopolitical framework challenges the longstanding dominance of the U.S. in the Middle East, as China's influence continues to grow in the Middle East while contributing to China's energy security in terms of direct access to oil, trade routes, and oil invoicing practices (Alshareef, 2023). In contrast, the United States, once the principal architect of regional security and diplomacy, now faces a more complex and competitive environment. As China positions itself as a key player in the Middle East, it challenges the U.S.'s political and military influence and reshapes the regional balance of power. The research concludes that Middle Eastern countries, increasingly empowered by this diversification of alliances, are asserting their strategic priorities and seeking to play a more prominent role in the emerging global order. This shift represents a significant departure from the past, with China's rise signaling the potential for a new era of international relations in the Middle East and beyond.

Military Engagement and Security Architecture

China's military footprint in the Middle East has traditionally been limited, reflecting a cautious approach that prioritizes economic and diplomatic engagement over direct military intervention. However, this stance is gradually evolving as China seeks to bolster its strategic presence in the region, aligning with its broader geopolitical ambitions. Through a combination of arms deals, military cooperation agreements, and the potential establishment of strategic military facilities, China is beginning to assert a more significant role in the Middle East's security dynamics (Matthews & Matthews, 2024).

This shift in China's military engagement represents a natural extension of its expanding influence, driven by its desire to secure its interests in energy, trade, and regional stability. While still far from the extensive military presence maintained by the U.S. in the region, China's growing involvement offers Middle Eastern countries an alternative to traditional Western military alliances, which have often been accompanied by political conditionality and interventionist policies. By providing defense partnerships that focus on pragmatic, mutually beneficial cooperation, China is positioning itself as a reliable partner in the region's security, particularly as many countries seek to reduce their dependence on the U.S. military presence (Xu and He, 2022).

China's approach to military engagement in the Middle East emphasizes pragmatism and non-interference, a stark contrast to the ideological and often contentious nature of Western interventions. This policy allows China to strengthen ties with regional powers while avoiding the political baggage that accompanies U.S. military alliances. The Chinese model of security cooperation is largely focused on arms sales, joint training, counterterrorism operations, and the potential for future collaboration on military infrastructure, providing a more flexible and less politically charged alternative for Middle Eastern nations (Clarke & Sussex, 2023).

The restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 was widely seen as a significant moment in the Middle East, and many credited China for playing a key role in facilitating the agreement. The primary drivers of the agreement were Saudi Arabia's increasing economic and military strength. While China's commercial interests aligned with Saudi Arabia, it was Iran's perception that China was Saudi Arabia, rather than China's direct diplomatic actions, that had the most influence. Baghernia (2024) explains that the economic interests aligned, since on the Saudi side, the decision to de-escalate tensions with Iran was motivated by its broader geopolitical goals.

In contrast, Abdul-Hussain (2023) maintains that China is increasingly positioning itself as a key powerbroker in the Middle East and the Gulf region, potentially replacing the United States in this role. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, a long-time ally of the U.S., seems to be shifting its stance, moving closer to China. He argues that this shift aligns with Saudi Arabia's preference for a non-liberal world order, even though Saudi Arabia's economic interests remain closely tied to the U.S. and the West.

As regional instability continues to grow, China's involvement in the Middle East's security architecture is poised to increase. The shift away from traditional Western-led military frameworks and the increasing desire among regional powers to explore new security arrangements create an opening for China to expand its role as a security partner. Through its strategic partnerships and arms deals, China can offer regional players greater autonomy and an alternative to U.S.-led interventions. Nevertheless, Abdul-Hussain (2023) suggests that Saudi Arabia's relationship with China is not deep enough to fundamentally alter its traditional alignment with the West. While Saudi Arabia has increased bilateral trade and investments with China, suggesting a deeper relationship, the article emphasizes that these ties are primarily transactional rather than strategic. This transactional nature implies that the relationship may not be durable or sustainable over the long term.

Non-Interference and Respect for Sovereignty

China's growing involvement in the Middle East goes beyond energy and diplomacy, extending into technological and economic partnerships. In the wake of the October 7 escalation, China has ramped up its investments in the region, particularly in the digital economy, 5G networks, and smart city projects. These initiatives are part of China's broader strategy to position itself as the leading partner for development and modernization in the Middle East, further eroding the U.S.-dominated economic influence in the region.

This approach directly challenges the U.S.-led order that has long shaped the Middle East. As skepticism about the U.S.'s role in the region increases, China has stepped in as a counterbalance (Zheng & Zhang, 2023). Rather than focusing on military alliances or political interventions, China emphasizes economic engagement, presenting a stark contrast to the U.S.'s traditional methods of exerting influence. By fostering relationships with a diverse range of Middle Eastern nations, China further weakens U.S. influence and establishes itself as a neutral, alternative partner. Post-October 7, China has bolstered its economic ties with the Middle East, focusing on trade, investment, and development cooperation. This strategic pivot reflects China's broader economic goals of securing stable supply chains, reliable energy sources, and expanding markets for its growing economic interests in the region (Rekhviashvili & Lang, 2024).

At the heart of China's strategy in the Middle East is the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. This approach sharply contrasts with the West's more interventionist stance, which includes military interventions, regime changes, and the promotion of democracy, with mixed results. While the U.S. and European powers have been involved in numerous military interventions in the region, such as in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, China has consistently refrained from direct military engagement (Matar, 2024). Instead, it prioritizes diplomatic solutions and economic development as its primary tools for fostering stability.

This policy of non-interference resonates strongly with many Middle Eastern regimes, which value their political autonomy and stability over external pressures to adopt Western-style governance. The West's history of

disregarding sovereignty, especially in matters of regime change and democratization, has often alienated governments in the region, making China's diplomatic approach more attractive. By avoiding the imposition of a political model, China presents itself as a reliable partner that respects the internal governance systems of Middle Eastern countries.

China's growing influence positions it as a challenger to the U.S.-backed liberal international order. For decades, the liberal order has been based on principles like democracy, human rights, free markets, and multilateralism. However, many Middle Eastern nations have become disillusioned with the results of U.S. foreign policy, particularly its military interventions and its tendency to overlook regional dynamics. The chaotic aftermath of Western-led military campaigns, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the failure to foster lasting democratic reforms, have led many in the region to question the value of aligning with the West (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2023).

China offers an alternative vision for the region that prioritizes stability, development, and economic cooperation over political transformation. While Western powers often demand democratic reforms and political liberalization as conditions for foreign aid or investment, China's approach is much more flexible. It focuses on trade and infrastructure development, without pressuring nations to adopt Western political models. This makes China an increasingly attractive option for Middle Eastern countries seeking to modernize economically without the accompanying demand to reform their political systems according to Western norms (Dadparvar & Parto, 2025).

In the long term, China's expanding military engagement may serve to secure its strategic interests and provide Middle Eastern nations with more diversified security options. This evolving role could reshape the region's security architecture, as China emerges as a key player alongside traditional powers and regional security organizations. The result is a more multipolar security environment in which countries in the Middle East have greater latitude to navigate their own defense needs without being tethered to any single global power.

Conclusion

China's rising influence in the Middle East marks a pivotal transformation in the region's political, economic, and security frameworks. By focusing on pragmatic cooperation, centered on economic development, energy security, and a policy of non-interference, China offers an alternative model to the often politically charged engagements of Western powers. This shift challenges the U.S.-centric geopolitical order and positions China as a key power broker in the Middle East, reshaping the traditional dynamics that have defined the region for decades.

Central to China's growing influence is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has facilitated substantial investments in critical infrastructure, energy projects, and technological advancements. These initiatives, coupled with its strategic diplomacy, such as mediating between regional rivals, underscore China's ability to leverage economic and diplomatic tools to expand its presence. The diplomatic success in brokering agreements, particularly between countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, highlights China's role as a neutral, stabilizing force in a historically tumultuous region.

In parallel, China's gradual military engagement further reflects its evolving role in the region's security architecture. Through arms deals, security cooperation, and the potential establishment of military facilities, China is offering Middle Eastern nations alternative security arrangements to those traditionally provided by the U.S. and its allies. This expanding military footprint signals the beginning of a more multipolar security environment in the Middle East, where China plays a pivotal role alongside other global powers.

China's deepening involvement in the Middle East is part of its broader strategy to reshape the global order. By positioning itself as a champion of sovereignty, economic development, and non-interference, China is providing Middle Eastern countries with greater autonomy in navigating their international relations. As the region increasingly seeks to diversify its foreign alliances, China is emerging as a central actor, challenging the longstanding dominance of the U.S. and its Western allies and redefining the geopolitical landscape in the process. The research argues that as China continues to solidify its influence, the Middle East's future will be shaped by this new era of cooperation, where economic growth, diplomatic mediation, and security diversification are at the forefront of regional dynamics.

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