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The Reshaping of Alliance Relations in the Middle East amid U.S-China Strategic Competition(2017-2025)

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Abstract

The Middle East has become one of the most significant arenas of strategic competition between the United States and China, particularly during the period from 2017 to 2025. This rivalry has profoundly influenced regional alliances, security arrangements, and the foreign policy orientations of Middle Eastern states. While the United States has traditionally relied on military alliances, security commitments, and political influence to preserve its regional leadership, China has increasingly expanded its presence through economic cooperation, infrastructure investment, technological partnerships, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, regional states have adopted more flexible foreign policies, seeking to balance their relations between Washington and Beijing without abandoning either power.

This study examines how security considerations and strategic interests have shaped regional alliances under the evolving U.S.–China competition. It analyzes the interaction between military security, economic interdependence, energy security, and geopolitical competition in influencing alliance behavior across the Middle East. Furthermore, the research explores future scenarios for regional security architecture and evaluates the implications of increasing multipolarity for regional stability.

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The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach supported by realism and balance-of-power theory to explain the behavior of regional actors.

It argues that U.S.–China competition has transformed traditional alliance structures into more flexible and interest-based partnerships, allowing Middle Eastern states to diversify their strategic options while reducing excessive dependence on a single great power.

Keywords: U.S.–China Competition; Middle East; Regional Alliances; Security Considerations; Strategic Interests; Balance of Power; Belt and Road Initiative; Energy Security.

Introduction

The Middle East has long occupied a central position in international politics because of its strategic geographic location, abundant energy resources, and its role as a vital crossroads connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Throughout modern history, the region has attracted the attention of major powers seeking to protect their political, economic, and security interests. In recent years, the strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has emerged as one of the defining features of the international system, significantly influencing political developments and alliance patterns in the Middle East.

Since 2017, the intensification of U.S.–China competition has reshaped the strategic environment of the region. The United States has continued to rely on its long-standing military alliances, extensive security

partnerships, and forward military presence to maintain regional stability and safeguard its strategic interests. China, on the other hand, has expanded its regional influence primarily through economic diplomacy, infrastructure investment, technological cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These different approaches have created a new strategic landscape in which military power and economic influence operate simultaneously as complementary instruments of great-power competition.

Regional alliances have consequently become more flexible and pragmatic than in previous decades. Instead of maintaining exclusive alignment with a single great power, many Middle Eastern states have adopted diversified foreign policies that combine security cooperation with the United States and expanding economic relations with China. This strategic flexibility reflects the growing importance of national interests, economic development, and regional stability in shaping contemporary foreign policy decisions.

The competition between Washington and Beijing extends beyond traditional military rivalry to include technological innovation, digital infrastructure, energy security, trade, investment, and control over strategic maritime routes. The Middle East has therefore become an essential arena where geopolitical, economic, and technological interests intersect. The region's vast hydrocarbon resources, critical sea lanes, and emerging economic markets have further increased its significance within the broader framework of global power competition.

At the same time, regional actors have become increasingly influential in shaping the dynamics of this competition. Rather than serving merely as passive arenas for great-power rivalry, Middle Eastern states actively seek to maximize the benefits of cooperation with both powers while preserving their strategic autonomy. Through balanced diplomacy and diversified partnerships, these states attempt to enhance national security, attract foreign investment, modernize their economies, and strengthen their regional and international positions.

Accordingly, the interaction between security considerations and strategic interests has become a defining characteristic of regional alliances in the Middle East. Understanding this interaction is essential for explaining the transformation of the regional order during the period 2017–2025 and for assessing how the evolving U.S.–China competition continues to shape the future of security, diplomacy, and geopolitical relations in one of the world's most strategically important regions.

Research Importance

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has emerged as one of the defining characteristics of contemporary international politics. Unlike previous periods dominated by a single superpower, the international system is gradually moving toward greater multipolarity, increasing the strategic significance of regions that possess vital geopolitical and economic resources. Among these regions, the Middle East occupies a unique position because of its energy resources, strategic maritime routes, military bases, and political influence over neighboring regions (Mearsheimer, 2014).

The importance of this research stems from the growing impact of U.S.–China competition on regional alliance patterns. Unlike the Cold War, where alliance structures were relatively rigid, current regional alliances demonstrate greater flexibility, allowing Middle Eastern states to simultaneously cooperate with both Washington and Beijing according to their national interests (Walt, 1987). Understanding these developments contributes to explaining the transformation of regional security architecture and the evolution of strategic partnerships in the twenty-first century.

Moreover, China's expanding economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has introduced new dimensions to regional politics by linking infrastructure investment, technology, and trade with geopolitical competition. Meanwhile, the United States continues to maintain extensive military deployments and strategic partnerships across the region, creating a complex environment in which economic and security considerations increasingly overlap (Rolland, 2020).

Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze the impact of U.S. –China strategic competition on regional alliances in the Middle East.
2. To examine the relationship between security considerations and alliance formation.
3. To identify the strategic interests motivating both the United States and China in the region.
4. To evaluate the role of regional states in balancing relations between the competing powers.
5. To explore future scenarios for regional alliances under continuing great-power competition.

Research Problem

The central research problem can be formulated as follows:
How has the strategic competition between the United States and China influenced regional alliances in the Middle East through security considerations and strategic interests during the period 2017–2025?
This question generates several subsidiary questions:

- How have regional security concerns affected alliance formation?
- What strategic interests motivate both great powers in the Middle East?
- How have regional states responded to increasing geopolitical competition?
- What future alliance patterns are likely to emerge?

Research Hypothesis

The study assumes that:
The intensification of strategic competition between the United States and China has encouraged Middle Eastern states to adopt more flexible and diversified alliance strategies, balancing security cooperation with the United States against expanding economic partnerships with China, thereby reshaping the regional security order.

Research Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical methodology, supported by the theoretical perspectives of Structural Realism (Neorealism) and the Balance of Power Theory. The study analyzes political, security, and economic developments between 2017 and 2025 through qualitative analysis of official documents, scholarly literature, policy reports, and international statistics.

1. Security Considerations under the U.S.–China Competition

The Middle East has long been recognized as one of the world's most strategically significant regions due to its geopolitical location, vast energy resources, and its role as a crossroads connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. Since 2017, the strategic competition between the United States and China has increasingly influenced regional security dynamics. While the United States continues to prioritize military superiority, alliance commitments, and deterrence strategies, China has gradually expanded its regional presence through economic engagement accompanied by selective security cooperation. Consequently, regional governments have increasingly linked their security calculations with broader strategic and economic interests rather than relying exclusively on traditional military alliances (Allison, 2017).
Unlike the bipolar structure of the Cold War, contemporary security competition in the Middle East is characterized by multidimensional interactions involving military, economic, technological, and diplomatic instruments. This transformation has encouraged regional powers to pursue more flexible security arrangements that maximize national interests while avoiding direct alignment with either Washington or Beijing (Walt, 1987).

١،١Strategic Security Dynamics in the Middle East

Security dynamics in the Middle East have undergone significant transformation over the last decade. Traditional interstate military threats have increasingly been accompanied by non-traditional security challenges, including terrorism, cyber threats, proxy conflicts, maritime insecurity, energy infrastructure vulnerability, and transnational armed groups. These evolving challenges have complicated regional security calculations and created opportunities for external powers to expand their influence.
The United States has maintained a comprehensive security architecture based on military alliances, forward deployment of forces, intelligence sharing, advanced weapon systems, and extensive defense cooperation agreements with key regional partners. Its primary objectives include protecting maritime trade routes, ensuring freedom of navigation, preventing nuclear proliferation, and maintaining the regional balance of power (Cordesman, 2020).
China, by contrast, has adopted a different security approach. Rather than establishing extensive military alliances, Beijing emphasizes economic stability as a prerequisite for regional security. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China seeks to reduce strategic vulnerabilities by investing in ports, logistics infrastructure, digital connectivity, and energy transportation corridors. Although China's military footprint remains relatively limited, its growing naval activities, anti-piracy operations, and defense diplomacy indicate an expanding strategic role (Rolland, 2020.(
As a result, Middle Eastern governments increasingly perceive security not only in military terms but also through economic resilience, technological development, and diversified international partnerships. This

broader understanding of security has enabled regional states to simultaneously cooperate with the United States on defense while strengthening economic relations with China (Gause, 2019).

١,٢Military Alliances and Regional Security

Military alliances remain one of the principal instruments through which the United States maintains its strategic influence in the Middle East. Long-standing partnerships with countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, and Israel provide Washington with access to military facilities, intelligence networks, and rapid deployment capabilities. These alliances contribute to deterrence against regional threats while reinforcing the United States' role as the principal external security provider (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Nevertheless, several regional developments—including the gradual reduction of direct American military engagement, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and shifting strategic priorities toward the Indo-Pacific—have generated uncertainty among regional partners regarding the long-term credibility of U.S. security commitments. Consequently, many Middle Eastern governments have begun diversifying their strategic partnerships without abandoning their traditional alliances.

China has generally avoided forming formal military alliances. Instead, it promotes comprehensive strategic partnerships emphasizing defense dialogue, military training, arms technology cooperation, counterterrorism collaboration, and naval diplomacy. This approach allows Beijing to expand its regional influence while minimizing direct confrontation with the United States.

The coexistence of American military dominance and Chinese economic expansion has produced a hybrid regional security environment in which states increasingly pursue "multi-alignment" rather than exclusive alliance commitments. Such flexibility reflects pragmatic foreign policy strategies aimed at maximizing national security and economic opportunities simultaneously (Walt, 1987).

١,٣The Role of External Powers in Regional Stability

External powers continue to play a decisive role in shaping regional stability across the Middle East. Besides the United States and China, actors such as Russia, the European Union, Türkiye, and India increasingly influence regional security through diplomacy, arms sales, economic cooperation, and political mediation.

For the United States, preserving regional stability is closely linked to maintaining freedom of navigation, protecting allies, countering terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and securing global energy markets. Consequently, Washington continues to rely upon extensive military infrastructure combined with political and diplomatic engagement (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

China approaches regional stability from a different perspective. Beijing emphasizes economic development, infrastructure investment, and non-interference in domestic affairs as essential foundations for sustainable security. Chinese policymakers argue that economic growth reduces instability by addressing structural causes of conflict and strengthening regional interdependence (Rolland, 2020).

Meanwhile, regional governments increasingly exploit strategic competition among external powers to enhance their bargaining position. Rather than choosing between Washington and Beijing, they pursue balanced foreign policies that maximize diplomatic flexibility, attract foreign investment, diversify security cooperation, and preserve strategic autonomy. This emerging pattern demonstrates that regional actors are no longer passive recipients of great-power influence but active participants in shaping the evolving regional order (Gause, 2019).

Overall, security considerations under U.S.–China competition have become increasingly multidimensional, integrating military deterrence, economic security, technological cooperation, and geopolitical balancing. This transformation represents one of the defining characteristics of Middle Eastern regional politics during the period 2017–2025.

2.Strategic Interests

Strategic interests constitute the primary driving force behind the policies of both the United States and China in the Middle East. Although the two powers employ different instruments to pursue their objectives, both recognize the region as indispensable to global energy security, international trade, geopolitical influence, and the future balance of power. Since 2017, their competition has increasingly shifted from direct military rivalry toward comprehensive strategic competition encompassing economics, technology, energy, infrastructure, diplomacy, and supply-chain resilience (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015).

For Middle Eastern states, these competing strategic interests have created unprecedented opportunities to diversify partnerships and maximize national benefits. Rather than aligning exclusively with one major

power, many regional governments have adopted pragmatic foreign policies that balance security cooperation with the United States and economic engagement with China (Gause, 2019).

٢,١ Energy Security and Global Energy Markets

Energy remains the cornerstone of strategic competition in the Middle East. The region possesses nearly half of the world's proven oil reserves and a substantial share of global natural gas resources, making it indispensable to international energy markets (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023).

Although the United States has significantly increased domestic energy production through shale oil and gas development, it continues to view the uninterrupted flow of Gulf energy resources as essential to global economic stability and the security of its allies. Consequently, Washington maintains extensive naval and military capabilities to safeguard strategic maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

China's dependence on imported energy has expanded considerably over the past two decades. As the world's largest importer of crude oil, Beijing relies heavily on Middle Eastern suppliers, particularly Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Ensuring stable energy supplies has therefore become a central objective of Chinese foreign policy (Downs, 2006).

To reduce strategic vulnerability, China has pursued long-term energy agreements, expanded investments in refineries, pipelines, liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities, and renewable energy projects, while strengthening partnerships with regional energy producers. This strategy seeks not only to secure energy imports but also to enhance China's political and economic influence across the region (Rolland, 2020).

As energy security increasingly intersects with geopolitical competition, regional energy exporters have gained greater bargaining power. Many Middle Eastern governments now leverage their strategic importance to attract investment, negotiate favorable agreements, and diversify international partnerships.

٢,٢ The Belt and Road Initiative and Economic Competition

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has become the principal instrument of Beijing's strategic engagement with the Middle East. Through investments in transportation networks, industrial zones, digital infrastructure, logistics hubs, and financial cooperation, China has sought to establish long-term economic interdependence with regional states (Rolland, 2020).

The Middle East occupies a pivotal geographic position within the BRI, connecting East Asia with Europe and Africa. Major infrastructure projects in ports, railways, industrial parks, and telecommunications have expanded China's economic footprint while increasing its political influence.

The United States, however, views certain aspects of the BRI with caution, arguing that some projects may increase financial dependence, expand Chinese geopolitical leverage, and create strategic vulnerabilities for participating countries (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015).

Consequently, Washington has promoted alternative initiatives emphasizing transparent investment, sustainable infrastructure, and high governance standards in collaboration with allies.

For Middle Eastern countries, Chinese investment represents an important source of economic diversification, particularly under national development programs such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's economic modernization strategy, and Iraq's infrastructure reconstruction efforts. Rather than replacing relations with the United States, these initiatives generally complement existing security partnerships while expanding economic opportunities.

Accordingly, economic competition has become one of the defining dimensions of U.S.–China rivalry, transforming infrastructure development into an instrument of strategic influence.

٢,٣ Strategic Maritime Routes and Geopolitical Influence

Control and protection of strategic maritime routes remain fundamental to great-power competition in the Middle East. Critical waterways—including the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Eastern Mediterranean—facilitate a substantial proportion of global energy exports and international trade.

For the United States, maintaining freedom of navigation has long been a central component of its regional strategy. The U.S. Navy routinely conducts maritime security operations and works closely with allied states to deter threats against commercial shipping and regional stability (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

China likewise recognizes that uninterrupted maritime access is indispensable to its economic growth. Because a significant share of Chinese imports and exports passes through Middle Eastern sea lanes, Beijing has expanded its maritime diplomacy, anti-piracy operations, and port investments across the region. While

China officially characterizes these activities as supporting international commerce and maritime security, many analysts argue that they also contribute to Beijing's long-term geopolitical influence (Rolland, 2020). Competition over maritime infrastructure extends beyond naval power. Ports, logistics centers, undersea communication cables, and digital infrastructure have become strategic assets shaping regional influence. As a result, economic connectivity and geopolitical competition have become increasingly interconnected. Regional states have responded by encouraging investment from multiple international partners while avoiding excessive dependence on any single power. This strategy reflects a broader trend toward strategic diversification and reinforces the emergence of a more flexible regional order.

Overall, strategic interests in the Middle East increasingly integrate energy security, economic connectivity, technological development, and geopolitical positioning. These interconnected dimensions have transformed the region into one of the most significant arenas of twenty-first-century great-power competition.

3. The Future of U.S.–China Competition

The trajectory of U.S.–China competition in the Middle East will significantly influence the evolution of regional alliances, security arrangements, and geopolitical stability in the coming years. Between 2017 and 2025, the region witnessed a gradual transition from a predominantly U.S.-centered security architecture toward a more diversified regional order characterized by multiple strategic partnerships. This transformation reflects broader structural changes in the international system, where great-power competition increasingly extends beyond military confrontation to encompass economic, technological, diplomatic, and institutional dimensions (Allison, 2017).

Rather than replacing the United States as the dominant security actor, China is expected to continue expanding its regional influence through economic statecraft, infrastructure development, technological cooperation, and energy partnerships. Consequently, Middle Eastern governments are likely to maintain diversified foreign policies aimed at maximizing national interests while avoiding direct alignment with either major power (Walt, 1987).

٣،١Future Scenarios for Regional Alliances

Several scenarios may shape the future of regional alliances under continuing U.S.–China competition.

Scenario One: Strategic Balance

The most probable scenario is the continuation of strategic balancing. Under this arrangement, regional states preserve their security cooperation with the United States while simultaneously expanding economic and technological partnerships with China. Such a dual-track strategy enables governments to maximize both security and economic benefits without becoming exclusively dependent on a single external actor (Gause, 2019).

Scenario Two: Intensified Great-Power Competition

A second scenario involves a significant escalation in strategic rivalry. Increased competition over advanced technologies, artificial intelligence, semiconductor supply chains, energy infrastructure, and maritime security could intensify political polarization within the Middle East. Regional governments may face increasing pressure to limit cooperation with one side in favor of the other, reducing their diplomatic flexibility (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015).

Scenario Three: Regional Strategic Autonomy

A third scenario envisions greater strategic autonomy among Middle Eastern states. Strengthened regional institutions, expanded economic integration, and diversified international partnerships could gradually reduce dependence on external powers. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Qatar, and Egypt increasingly pursue independent foreign policies that prioritize national development while maintaining constructive relations with multiple global actors (Kamrava, 2022).

Although these scenarios differ in their outcomes, they share one common characteristic: regional alliances are becoming increasingly flexible, issue-specific, and driven by pragmatic calculations rather than ideological commitments.

٣،٢Implications for Middle Eastern Security and Stability

The continuation of U.S.–China competition is expected to produce both opportunities and challenges for regional security.

From a positive perspective, competition between major powers may generate increased foreign investment, infrastructure development, technological innovation, and economic diversification. Access to multiple

international partners enhances the bargaining power of regional governments and creates additional opportunities for sustainable development (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023).

However, intensified geopolitical rivalry also carries significant risks. Competition over strategic infrastructure, digital technologies, maritime routes, and critical energy resources could increase regional tensions, particularly if major powers attempt to transform economic competition into military confrontation.

Moreover, technological competition has emerged as a new dimension of regional security. Cooperation in areas such as fifth-generation telecommunications (5G), artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital finance, and satellite technologies increasingly influences national security calculations. Consequently, future regional alliances may depend as much on technological compatibility as on traditional military cooperation (Rolland, 2020).

Another important implication concerns the evolution of regional diplomacy. Middle Eastern governments are expected to continue adopting "multi-vector" foreign policies that simultaneously engage multiple international partners. This approach reflects a broader transition toward a more multipolar regional environment in which strategic flexibility becomes a key element of national security policy.

Overall, the future regional order is likely to be characterized by coexistence rather than confrontation. Although strategic competition between the United States and China will remain intense, regional governments will continue seeking balanced partnerships that support both national security and economic modernization.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between regional alliances in the Middle East and the strategic competition between the United States and China during the period 2017–2025. It demonstrated that contemporary great-power competition differs fundamentally from previous geopolitical rivalries because it extends beyond military confrontation to encompass economic development, technological innovation, infrastructure investment, energy security, and diplomatic influence.

The research showed that the United States remains the principal military and security actor in the Middle East through its extensive alliance network and forward military presence. In contrast, China has expanded its influence primarily through economic partnerships, the Belt and Road Initiative, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development. Rather than replacing American influence, Chinese engagement has introduced new dimensions of strategic competition that have diversified the foreign policy options available to regional governments.

The study further concluded that Middle Eastern states have responded pragmatically by pursuing flexible alliance strategies based on national interests rather than exclusive geopolitical alignment. These multidimensional partnerships have strengthened regional strategic autonomy while contributing to the gradual transformation of the regional security architecture toward greater multipolarity.

Findings

The study reached the following conclusions:

1. U.S.–China competition has transformed the structure of regional alliances from rigid military alignments into flexible strategic partnerships.
2. Security considerations remain the primary determinant of relations with the United States, whereas economic development constitutes the principal foundation of cooperation with China.
3. Energy security continues to represent the most significant strategic interest shared by both great powers in the Middle East.
4. China's Belt and Road Initiative has significantly expanded Beijing's regional political and economic influence.
5. Middle Eastern governments increasingly pursue balanced foreign policies that diversify international partnerships while preserving strategic autonomy.
6. The future regional order is expected to become increasingly multipolar and characterized by greater diplomatic flexibility.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Middle Eastern governments should continue diversifying strategic partnerships while preserving balanced relations with both the United States and China.

2. Regional states should strengthen indigenous defense capabilities to reduce excessive dependence on external security providers.

3. Greater investment should be directed toward economic diversification, technological innovation, and infrastructure modernization.

4. Regional organizations should expand security dialogue mechanisms to address emerging challenges collectively.

5. Policymakers should promote multilateral diplomacy to reduce the risks associated with intensified great-power competition.

6. Future academic research should examine the implications of artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and emerging technologies for regional security and alliance formation.

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