Asymmetric Competition on a New Battleground? Middle Eastern Perspectives on Sino-US Rivalry

Gangzheng She

Gangzheng She is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Tsinghua University

*Corresponding author. Email: shegangzheng@tsinghua.edu.cn

Abstract

During the last few years, and especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, growing number of Middle East scholars and analysts have been closely observing an escalation of tensions between China and the United States and their impact beyond bilateral ties. Considering the major differences of focus and approach among these observers, this article aims to review systematically such Middle Eastern perspectives, both globally and regionally, on the emerging Sino-US rivalry. Certain Middle East analysts regard Beijing and Washington as largely “homogeneous” extra-regional powers competing in international politics, economy, and technology. Many others emphasise their “heterogeneity,” arguing that the essence of Sino-US confrontation lies in the clash of two models. Most Middle East scholars note that, in contrast to Washington’s waning influence, Beijing’s growing presence in the region during the past decade has rendered the Middle East a “new battleground” for the two great powers. Although China and the United States still have shared interests in certain regional affairs, most intellectuals focus on and collectively identify five domains across the Middle East wherein Beijing and Washington are locked in asymmetric competition. In light of both the opportunities and challenges that the emerging Sino-US rivalry engenders, Middle Eastern observers raise various policy suggestions, and debate on whether regional players should proactively take advantage of this great power competition, cautiously hedge against strategic uncertainty and risk, or constructively help reduce hostility between the United States and the People’s Republic of China.

Introduction

Relations between Washington and Beijing deteriorated sharply during the Trump presidency, most notably after the 2017 National Security Strategy...
Report of the United States labelled the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a serious strategic competitor.\(^1\) The signing of the so-called “Phase One” Trade Deal notwithstanding, tension between the two great powers has mounted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and China-bashing among US policymakers become par for the course. In the summer of 2020, National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Attorney General William Barr, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a quad of bellicose speeches denouncing Beijing in almost every respect.\(^2\) In light of the United States’s harsh criticism and punitive measures, respectively, in regard to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and Chinese technology companies, Beijing retaliated by slapping sanctions on US lawmakers, stepping up “high-intensity” naval exercises, and launching a sweeping media counter-attack, as well as shutting down the US consulate in Chengdu after the Trump administration forced its Chinese counterpart in Houston to close.\(^3\) Consequently, some anticipate a possible “new cold war” that poses an even bigger threat to the world than COVID-19. United Nation (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres publicly acknowledged that the Sino-US relationship, “has never been as dysfunctional as it is today,” and expressed deep

\(^1\) Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S. Relations with China, 1949-2020,” July 2020, [https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china](https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china); The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf).

\(^2\) Robert C. O’Brien, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Ideology and Global Ambitions,” National Security Council, 24 June, 2020, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/chinese-communist-partys-ideology-global-ambitions/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/chinese-communist-partys-ideology-global-ambitions/); Christopher A. Wray, “The Threat Posed by the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the Economic and National Security of the United States,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, 7 July, 2020, [https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-threat-posed-by-the-chinese-government-and-the-chinese-communist-party-to-the-economic-and-national-security-of-the-united-states;](https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-threat-posed-by-the-chinese-government-and-the-chinese-communist-party-to-the-economic-and-national-security-of-the-united-states;); William P. Barr, “Attorney General William P. Barr Delivers Remarks on China Policy at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum,” US Department of Justice, 16 July, 2020, [https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-china-policy-gerald-r-ford-presidential](https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-china-policy-gerald-r-ford-presidential); Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” US Department of State, 23 July, 2020, [https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future](https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future).

\(^3\) Keith Bradsher and Steven Lee Myers, “China Orders U.S. to Shut Chengdu Consulate, Retaliating for Houston,” *The New York Times*, 24 July, 2020, [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/asia/china-us-consulate-chengdu.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/asia/china-us-consulate-chengdu.html); Eva Dou and Anna Fifield, “China Puts Sanctions on U.S. Lawmakers, NGO Chiefs, in Tit-for-Tat Retaliation,” *The Washington Post*, 10 August, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-sanctions-cruz-rubio-retaliation-hong-kong/2020/08/10/f8e221a4-dae2-11ea-b4f1-25b762c6bbf4_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-sanctions-cruz-rubio-retaliation-hong-kong/2020/08/10/f8e221a4-dae2-11ea-b4f1-25b762c6bbf4_story.html).
concern over the possibility that this multifaceted, wide-ranging confrontation might eventually divide the world into two blocs, with two sets of trade and technology rules, as well as conflicting military and geopolitical strategies.4

As worsening tensions between the United States and China show signs of extending beyond the bilateral to the global level, many observers comment that such great power competition come to a head its subsequent impact could also change the face of Middle Eastern affairs.5 In fact, countries in the Middle East, a region which over the past few decades seemed far from a focal point of Sino-US relations, now face a new political and economic calculus as Beijing and Washington mount their respective campaigns to rally international support from the region through such issues as pandemic responsibility and response, 5G networks, Muslim minorities in China, and the Iran nuclear deal.6

There has been much discussion among Chinese and US scholars on the strategies and policies of the two great powers in the Middle East.7 On the one hand, Chinese researchers have always kept a close eye on the United States’ essential role in the Middle East, having discussed over the last decade such topics as American “strategic retrenchment” in the region.8 On the other hand, and more recently, senior analysts in American think tanks—and even the former commander of US Central Command—have advocated Washington’s adoption of “a

---

4 Justin Worland, “U.N. Secretary-General Warns U.S.-China Tensions Risk Dividing World Into ‘2 Blocs’,” TIME 100 Talks, 18 August, 2020, https://time.com/5879439/antonio-guterres-un-us-china.

5 Natan Sachs and Kevin Huggard, “Israel and the Middle East amid U.S.-China competition,” The Brookings Institution, 20 July, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/israel-and-the-middle-east-amid-u-s-china-competition.

6 James M. Dorsey, “Gulf States Caught in Middle of US-China Rivalry,” Asia Times, 25 June, 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/gulf-states-caught-in-middle-of-us-china-rivalry; Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, “Iran’s Pact with China Is Bad News for the West,” Foreign Policy, 9 August, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west.

7 As a transcontinental region, “Middle East” often leads to some confusion over its changing definitions. In this article, the term Middle East refers to the area including Iran, Mesopotamia, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and Turkey.

8 Niu Xinchen, “Xuanzexing jieru: meiguo zhongdong zhengce tiaozheng,” (“Selective Intervention: Adjustment of US Middle East Policy”) Waijiao pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review), No. 2 (2012), pp. 45–54; Sun Degang, “Lengzhan hou meiguo zhongdong junshi jidi de zhanlue tiaozheng,” (“Strategic Adjustment of US Military Bases in the Middle East after the Cold War”) Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics), No. 6 (2016), pp. 22–48; Niu Xinchen, “Meiguo zhongdong zhanlue: zhuaxing qi de mihuo,” (“U.S. Middle East Strategy: Confusion in a Transitional Period”) Dangdai shijie (Contemporary World), No. 3 (2020), pp. 11–8.
better China policy in the Middle East,” as Beijing’s presence and influence in West Asia and North Africa is now arguably “the most vexing and consequential” dilemma for US strategic interests in that region.9

Rich scholarly discussions having already taken place in China and the United States, seeking out and selecting Middle Eastern “voices” on related topics is both necessary and informative. As Odd Arne Westad reveals in his seminal work on Cold War international history, when responding to the United States and the USSR’s global designs it was, among peoples of the Third World, those in the Middle East that had the intention, and at times the capability—often more subtle and consequential than generally appreciated—to play one superpower off against the other.10 Considering the current position and potential importance of the Middle East in strategic interactions between Beijing and Washington, this article aims to address significant lacunae through a systematic analysis of Middle Eastern perspectives, be they in English as a lingua franca or in commonly spoken regional languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew, on the emerging Sino-US rivalry which has been underestimated and understudied.

So far, Chinese and American scholars’ analyses of Beijing and Washington’s relations with the Middle East have been overwhelmingly based on the perspectives of their respective countries. Observations from Middle Easterners could hence supplement the existing discussions with more indigenous perceptions of challenges and prospects, and thus better reveal the particularity of this region amid Sino-US rivalry, which covers at least four aspects. They are the instability of the regional security structure and its vulnerability to foreign intervention; the relevance of the Middle East to domestic politics in the United States and China, respectively; the current “abnormalities” in relations between the region and both of the great powers; and the dilemmas in regard to Beijing and Washington’s policy options in the foreseeable future. The works presented and discussed in the ensuing pages come mainly from scholars and analysts, including policy elites and former politicians, in major universities, think tanks, and media across the Middle East. They also include the opinions of certain observers and researchers of Middle Eastern origins that currently work in influential research institutes in other parts of the world.11 The opinions of most people analysed here reflect first

9 Brett McGurk, “China’s Risky Middle East Bet,” Atlantic, April 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/chinas-risky-middle-east-bet/588166; Bilal Y. Saab and Joseph Votel, “We Need a Better China Policy in the Middle East,” Defense One, 28 July, 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/07/need-new-china-policy-middle-east/167258; Michael Singh, “China and the United States in the Middle East: Between Dependency and Rivalry,” The Washington Institute, September 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/china-and-the-united-states-in-the-middle-east-between-dependency-and-rival.

10 Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 120–8, 197–200, 288–330.

11 The Middle Eastern scholars and observers chosen for this review article basically meet at least one of the following criteria: they are employed in those most prestigious universities
and foremost their individual perspectives. They could at the same time be collectively viewed as representative of regional voices over the past few years up to the present.\textsuperscript{12}

Over recent years, Middle East scholars have provided different explanations of the essential nature and key drivers of the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. Most discussions of the impact of this great power competition on the region have traditionally focused on security, trade, infrastructure, and investment. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, debates among Middle Easterners on topics related to Sino-US relations and the region have reached an unprecedented pitch, to the extent of potentially spreading to the fields of high technology, public health, and cultural exchanges. In general, Middle Eastern observers collectively identify several major domains in the region wherein Beijing and Washington are locked in “asymmetric competition,” and raise distinctly different policy recommendations as to how Middle Eastern countries should handle the opportunities or challenges that the situation engenders.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four main sections. Firstly, I review the major approaches of Middle East scholars to understanding Sino-US rivalry in general. Secondly, I highlight Middle Eastern views on the characteristics and trajectories of Washington and Beijing’s policies towards the region in the last decade from around the Arab Spring till the present. The focus of the third section is on the five domains in the Middle East wherein an asymmetric competition between China and the United States is considered to be taking place. I then examine the main categories of suggestions that Middle Eastern analysts raise in regard to allowing regional players to deal with this great power competition, as well as the logic behind their views. The article concludes by summarising its findings, and discussing how Middle Eastern perspectives may contribute to understanding the forms and global impact of Sino-US strategic competition.

**General Understanding of Sino-US Rivalry**

Although Middle East scholars and analysts debate on many aspects of China and the United States, their approaches to understanding the escalating tensions in Sino-US strategic relations generally fall under two categories. The first approach tends to see China and the United States as “homogeneous,” extra-regional units, or think tanks in any Middle Eastern countries; they work full-time or part-time in well-known research institutions around the world; they express opinions or speak on media platforms of recognized regional influence; or provide some new perspectives, observations, or suggestions which are distinct from traditional ones. In addition, as to people “of Middle Eastern origin,” here I am referring to a person who was born in the Middle East and received a certain stage of formal education within the region.

\textsuperscript{12} It should be noted that, while individual perspectives are often inevitably affected by the country in which the observers are located, the different opinions of Middle Eastern scholars on Sino-US rivalry shall not be labelled as being directly connected to their nationalities, since, as shown later, different scholars from the same Middle Eastern country may put forward completely opposite views or suggestions.
or at least not differentiated in any important way. Middle Eastern observers in this category are arguably neorealist in nature, being either explicitly or implicitly united in the belief that the anarchic structure of international politics compels Beijing and Washington to confront each other.

Many Middle East scholars hold that the shrinking power gap between China and the United States has the potential to reshape the global order, thus challenging Washington’s status as the once-uncontested world leader. American elites, meanwhile, recognising that their country is on the way of retreat from the “long unipolar moment,” are developing new strategies to ensure that the United States remains the dominant global power. As researchers at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) Galia Lavi and Shira Efron observe, in American eyes, China has evolved from partner to competitor to rival, a sentiment further aggravated by the Coronavirus Crisis.\(^\text{13}\) Basheer Nafi, Palestinian-born senior researcher at the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies in Qatar, contends that one of the most prominent aspects of the post-pandemic controversy concerns America’s retreat and China’s rise as driving forces of a new international order.\(^\text{14}\)

To some observers in the Middle East, the Trump-launched trade war is the most conspicuous manifestation of Washington’s concerns regarding its decline in power relative to Beijing. China’s economy has been an important global growth engine over the past two decades, and its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) has accelerated a shift of the global economy’s centre of gravity towards Asia. Other powers, including China, have begun to utilise globalisation—once promoted by the United States to consolidate its status as global hegemon—as a tool to undermine American influence from within that system. Ziyad Bahaa Al-Din, renowned Egyptian economist and former deputy prime minister for economic affairs, and Abdel Moneim Saeed, director of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Cairo, argue that China’s success lies in its competitive advantages, such as market size, as well as integration of public and private sectors in global economic competition.\(^\text{15}\) As to the impact of the Coronavirus on the economic dimension of Sino-US competition, several Middle Eastern analysts assert that the COVID-19 pandemic will, in contrast to its affect on the West, likely accelerate Beijing’s steady economic growth, as China is expected to be the first country to

\(^\text{13}\) Galia Lavi and Shira Efron, “Foreign Involvement in Strategic Infrastructures Requires Clear Guidelines,” \textit{INSS Insight}, No. 1333, 11 June, 2020, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-and-the-israeli-infrastructure.

\(^\text{14}\) Basheer Nafi, “What Comes after the Pandemic?,” \textit{Al Sharq Forum}, 24 April, 2020, https://research.sharqforum.org/2020/04/25/what-comes-after-the-pandemic-predicting-the-world-to-come.

\(^\text{15}\) Abdel Moneim Saeed, “nihayat al-harb al-barida al-jadidal,“ (“The End of the ‘New Cold War!’”) \textit{Asharq Al-Awsat}, 1 January, 2020, https://aawsat.com/node/2060561; “alsiyin: ‘arba‘una ‘āmā min alhtauwwwl al‘iqtisādiyy,” (“China: Forty Years of Economic Transformation”) Egyptian Center for Economic Studies, 22 January, 2020, http://www.eces.org.eg/cms/NewsUploads/Pdf/2020_1_26-19_38_37PR%2020200122%20DLS%20China%2040. pdf.
emerge from the global pandemic nightmare. The United States, meanwhile, remains among the most affected countries in both the economic and humanitarian spheres.\textsuperscript{16}

Sino-US economic competition, however, might not be limited to a trade war. Washington also has the tools to instigate a financial or currency war. Iranian economist Farbad Dehqani notes that the United States, as leader of the current global financial system, could, in addition to tariffs, also impose sanctions on Chinese companies and financial institutions in a bid to inflict further damage on China’s economy as a whole. Beijing, however, might counterattack by selling US debt through Treasury bonds, and by developing digital currency programmes.\textsuperscript{17}

Abdul Hafiz Al-Sawy, Egyptian economist and former advisor to the finance minister, calls for special attention to “currency warfare,” emphasising that the two major players, namely Beijing and Washington, are out solely to preserve their own wealth, power, and global influence rather than act on behalf of developing countries or emerging markets.\textsuperscript{18}

A few experts in the Middle East go a step further by asserting that a “technology war” between Beijing and Washington, whose focus is primarily, but not exclusively, on the issues of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and 5G, merits more attention than tensions over trade or finance, because technological leadership is now the holy grail of advanced economies. As Egyptian economist Muhammad Mahdi Abdul Nabi argues, similar to the four previous generations of cellular communications the West mastered to promote its economic prosperity, 5G would create tremendous material and informational value, and hence the potential for China to overtake the United States and become the world’s largest economy.\textsuperscript{19}

In contrast to the first approach, which assumes “homogeneity” between Beijing and Washington as two great powers competing in politics, economy, and technology, the focus of the second approach is on the differences between China and the United States as two “heterogeneous” entities. The academic, social, and policy elites of the Middle East that follow this line tend to perceive the essence of conflict between the two countries as a clash of two models, two ideologies, or two cultures. To be more specific, observers that take the second approach could

\textsuperscript{16} Nafi, “What Comes after the Pandemic?.”

\textsuperscript{17} Farbad Dehqani, “Negâhi be Guzî’nehâ-ye Āmri’kâ baraye Tahrî’-m-e Chi’-n,” (“Observation of US Options for Sanctions Against China”) \textit{ISNA}, 31 May, 2020, https://www.isna.ir/news/99031106566.

\textsuperscript{18} Abdul Hafiz Al-Sawy, “Harb al-‘umlāt bayna America wa-l-Sî’n.. Su’āl wa-Jawāb,” (“The Currency War Between the United States and China: Question and Answer”) \textit{Aljazeera}, 8 September, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/ebusiness/2019/9/8.

\textsuperscript{19} Muhammad Mahdi Abdul Nabi, “sîrā’a al-jîyî al-khāmîs.. hal tastaḥîq hadhihi al-teqniya ‘an taqûm al-hurûb l’ajilîha?,” (“The 5G Struggle: Does This Technology Deserve to Be a Reason for War?”) \textit{Al Jazeera}, 16 June, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2019/6/16.
be classified under three subgroups, each of which shares similar patterns of reasoning and relatively congruent preferences.

Middle Eastern analysts in the first subgroup hold that the Chinese model, which in many ways constitutes an alternative to that of the West, prioritises economic development and stability at home, as well as a peaceful international environment abroad. Emel Parlar Dal, professor of political science at Marmara University in Turkey, maintains that, as Western-originated conditional and normative integration projects become less appealing by the day, the inclusive model of regionalism and inter-regionalism based on a win-win mentality that China offers is better suited to the needs of developing countries. As UAE columnist Laila Bin Hudna wrote in Al Bayan, an official newspaper of the government of Dubai, China has traditionally sought a silent rise that does not impinge on the current international system. Even in recent years, when playing a bigger role in ending the unipolar world through international organisations such as the UN, Beijing has consistently reassured all concerned that it has no intention to control or dominate. Meanwhile, a number of Arab and Iranian researchers critical of US hegemony argue that Washington’s adoption of a unilateral policy has created endless crises for the world in general, and the Middle East in particular. Against the background of COVID-19, former assistant foreign minister of Egypt Ezzat Saad contends that the pandemic crisis is not one of globalisation, but rather, “a crisis of the current global governance system” designed by the US and its Western allies.

The second subgroup contends that Beijing has become the largest threat to a liberal world order, equating an “American model” with “democracy and rule of law” and a “Chinese model” with “authoritarianism and predation.” Egyptian analyst Suleiman Juda questions both the sustainability of the Chinese model in the long run and its attractiveness to other parts of world. Other Middle Easterners assert that, unlike Washington and its Western allies, which at least pay lip service to human rights, Beijing throttles dissident voices and has, “proven to be an especially bad actor” in the international arena when it comes to commu-
Renowned Arab journalist and news editor Baria Alamuddin, moreover, considers China to be a “hawk” or “vulture,” and core member of the “axis of evil” that regards the crushing financial crises of fragile states as a bargaining chip whereby to consolidate its presence and influence in various regions, including the Middle East.

The third subgroup of Middle Eastern intellectuals, although cognisant of cultural or social differences as a core element of the head-on collision between China and the United States, hold negative views on both parties, perceiving them as models not only unfit for but also threatening to the region’s indigenous societies. Based on the theory of cultural imperialism and his analysis of Chinese and American media, cultural products, and related official policies, Ahmad Shohani, a former member of the Iranian Majles (parliament), concludes that Washington and Beijing each have an agenda in regard to disseminating their respective propaganda under the guise of promoting cultures and ways of life in foreign lands.

Some in the Middle East consider the recent COVID-19 responses from Beijing and Washington as manifestations of the respective characteristics of the two countries’ systems. The overtly harsh measures and lack of transparency on the part of the Chinese government and the United States’ unwillingness and/or inability to assist would suggest that neither Beijing nor Washington could be regarded as an admirable example of conduct in regard to the Coronavirus. It may be argued, therefore, that following either mode of pandemic response is unlikely to bring Middle Eastern societies any chance of success.

24 JPost Editorial, “China Has Proven to Be a Bad Actor. We Owe Them Nothing,” Jerusalem Post, 19 August, 2020, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/china-has-proven-to-be-a-bad-actor-we-owe-them-nothing-639116?from=timeline.
25 Baria Alamuddin, “Chinese and Iranian Vultures Circling over Beirut,” Arab News, 2 August, 2020, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1713456.
26 Ahmad Shohani and Faeze Mayli, “Naghsh-e abz/c22/ar h/c22/aya-ye farhangi/c22/ or c22/ a-ye bi/c22/nomelali/c22/-ye ghodrat-e bozorg az 11 septamber taknoon,” (“The Role of Cultural Methods in the International Policies of Major Powers: From 9/11 to the Present”) Pezhohesh-e melal (Research of Nations), No. 34 (2019), pp. 71-85.
27 Saud al-Sarhan and Mark C. Thompson, eds., “Report on the Regional and International impacts of CoronaVirus (Covid-19),” King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, No. 1, 6 April, 2020, pp. 3-4, https://www.kfcris.com/pdf/a41b4dbd8d6a0a66cb767bfabdfe9ee5e8b167800ab8.pdf.
28 For more criticism of COVID-19 disease response in China and the United States by Middle Eastern observers, see Biner Aziz, “Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Coronavirus Response—Lessons Learned,” Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute, 3 April, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Kurdistan-Iraq-COVID-KRG-KRI-Coronavirus-Middle-East; Amru Hamzawy, “Zaman kuriina... khatar alra'smalia a'lanifa,” (“Time of Coronavirus, Threat of Violent Capitalism”) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Middle East Centre), 31 March, 2020, https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/ar-pub-81408; Aziz is a politics analyst and former cultural senior official in the Kurdistan
In addition to observations on Sino-US rivalry in general, even larger numbers of Middle Eastern analysts have been discussing the characteristics of American and Chinese strategies in the region itself. Although they hold conflicting views regarding continuity and change of the two great powers’ respective characteristics, Middle Eastern scholars nevertheless collectively demonstrate that, in spite of differences in their strategic trends, the United States and China both face a wide range of dilemmas in dealing with regional affairs due to domestic and diplomatic factors.

US Middle East Policy
In the past decade, Washington’s strategic retrenchment and Beijing’s growing influence have been the most prominent features of the two countries’ relations with the Middle East. In fact, there is a near-consensus in the Middle East that the US influence has been waning, a phenomenon Middle Eastern observers ascribe to missteps in Washington’s regional policy, domestic constraints, and the declining importance of the Middle East in America’s grand strategy. First, many Americans remain haunted by the Iraq War debacle, as well as the after-shocks of the Arab Spring, not least the rise of ISIS. Brookings Doha Centre research fellow Ranj Alaaldin also notes that due to contradictions in statecraft, observable in foreign policies, between American ideals and actual needs, and despite having invested billions in the promotion of norms, good governance, and civil society in the Middle East over the decades, Washington nonetheless has a longstanding legacy of conflict in the region and support for autocrats. 29

Secondly, in addition to US blunders in regional affairs, certain scholars also focus on the domestic origins of Washington’s often confusing regional strategy. Fawaz Gerges, a Lebanese-American professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, holds that US presidential policy towards the Middle East is, more than any other region in the world, hampered by institutional, bureaucratic, and domestic politics. The policy and conduct of the Obama administration in regard to the Middle East, its lofty rhetoric about a new start in relations between Washington and the Muslim world notwithstanding, was testimony to such continuity of US foreign policy. 30

Thirdly, a few Middle Easterners argue that the region may seem less important to Washington than it did formerly. The last few years have seen the United States reassuming its status as the world’s largest and fastest-growing oil

29 Ranj Alaaldin, “Shaping the Political Order of the Middle East: Crisis and Opportunity,” IAI Papers, No. 9 (2019), https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1909.pdf.
30 Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?,” International Affairs, Vol. 89, No. 2 (2013), pp. 299–323.
producer. Over the same period, China’s rapid rise since the global financial crisis has undoubtedly been one of the White House’s greatest concerns. Therefore, it is only to be expected that Washington’s focus should shift from the Middle East to a concentrated effort on the so-called pivot to Asia or Indo-Pacific.

Although these factors fundamentally guarantee the direction of strategic retrenchment, President Trump’s personal understanding and impulsive handling of international affairs in the past few years have added new features to US Middle East policy that make it more distinctive than ever before. Trump’s seemingly erratic shifts between bellicosity and disengagement with the region have been a hot topic for Middle East scholars. Many contend that the Trump administration’s clear antagonism towards multilateralism, predilection for lobbing sanctions at its chosen enemies, not to mention an apparent absence of an overall strategy, have consolidated regional powers in “the axis of resistance,” and caused America’s traditional allies to distance themselves. American fatigue in the Middle East and its competing priorities elsewhere tempt US policymakers to continue disengaging from the region, so leaving the regional powers to shoulder more burdens, which enables external actors to seize more opportunities. For example, Iranian expert on Gulf politics Fatemeh Siyahi notes that although Saudi Arabia has played a vital role in cooperating with Washington to oppose Iran’s regional influence and to maintain Israel’s stability, Riyadh is now considering new international allies that might fill the gap that a possible US withdrawal would create.

On the other hand, some analysts hold that the United States is adopting a Middle East strategy that actually combines both strategic retrenchment and tactical assertiveness by focusing on more effective security and economic cooperation with its regional partners, most notably Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Moreover, the United States is likely to encourage the participation of friendly foreign powers such as India, Japan, and the European Union in the region, and seek to bring Washington’s regional allies closer together in an effort to bolster their resilience to economic and political crises. Although Biden has pledged to reverse many aspects of Trump’s policies in the region, the new administration will nevertheless continue to attach importance to the normalisation process that President Trump helped broker between Israel and several

31 Paul Rivlin, “China: Economy, Energy and the Middle East,” The Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 28 March, 2019, https://dayan.org/content/china-economy-energy-middle-east.
32 Ramzy Baroud, “Israel’s US-China Balancing Act in Peril,” Arab News, 1 June, 2020, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1683121.
33 Moshe Ya’alon, “United States Policy in the Middle East: The Need for a Grand Strategy,” INSS Special Publication, November 2017, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/united-states-policy-middle-east-need-grand-strategy.
34 Fatemeh Siyahi, “Ᾱyā Rāḥ-e Arabestān az Amri‘kā Jūdā Mi” Shavad? (“Will Saudi Arabia Separate from the United States’ Idea?”) irdiplomacy, 13 May, 2020, http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1991394.
Arab states, according to INSS senior research fellows Eldad Shavit and Yoel Guzansky.35

Since the Islamic revolution, Washington and many US Middle Eastern partners have perceived Tehran as one of the region’s most serious adversaries. Former Iranian ambassador to Jordan Nusratullah Tajik finds that, in contrast to Obama, who tried to convince Washington’s regional allies of the effectiveness of the Iran nuclear deal, Trump had a clear but entirely different strategy when dealing with the Islamic Republic. By putting maximum pressure on Tehran, the Trump administration tried to “empty” Iran from within and incite revolt against the regime.36 Nevertheless, due to Trump’s antipathy to launching another major war in the region, many believe there is little chance of a real fight. Tajik, among certain other scholars, argues that the probability of total war between Washington and Tehran, even after the US assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leader Qasem Soleimani, is extremely low, because the two countries are currently suffering the effects of both the COVID-19 pandemic and economic difficulties. Although distracting domestic attention may seem profitable for a while, the decision to go to war would be highly dangerous, as well as costly, for both sides.37 Under the new administration, according to Raghida Dergham, founder of the Beirut Institute and a prominent Lebanese-American journalist, US relations with Iran will still be at the heart of the region’s geopolitics.38 Biden might try once more to reach a deal with Iran, but he cannot ignore the existing realities of the last four years, and will need to address a host of difficult issues.

China’s Middle East Policy
Washington’s traditionally subtle relationship with the Middle East continues to draw attention. Many observers remain uncertain as to how US regional policy might shift as a result of escalating global competition with China. Therefore, China’s global rise and strengthening of regional ties in the Middle East becomes an ever more prominent issue among both friends and foes of Washington. With about $30 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2016, China became the largest investor in the Arab world. By contrast, US investment in Arab countries was less than a quarter of this amount over the same period.

35 Eldad Shavit and Yoel Guzansky, “Israel Faces a Biden Administration: Expected Disputes, Needed Adjustments,” Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute, 16 November, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-faces-biden-administration-expected-disputes-needed-adjustments.
36 Nusratullah Tajik, “Tājīk: Faqat Khatā-ye Mahāsebātī Bā’es-e Jang-e Mi‘yān-e Iran u Āmirīka Mi‘ Shavad, (Tajik: Only Computational Error Causes War between Iran and the United States)” IRNA, 11 May, 2020, http://www.ima.ir/news/83777904.
37 Ibid.
38 Mahmoud El Shabba, “What Should Arabs Expect from a Biden Win?,” The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, Fall 2020, https://www.thecaireview.com/midan/what-should-arabs-expect-from-a-biden-win.
Most observers agree that the Middle East could potentially become an essential component of Beijing’s BRI. Mordechai Chaziza, an Israeli political scientist in Ashkelon Academic College who studies Chinese strategic relations, states that although the Middle East, when compared to East or Southeast Asia, is not Beijing’s primary target for establishing a geopolitical sphere of influence, the region is nonetheless of greater importance to the PRC than ever before.\(^{39}\) Beijing is developing a sound understanding of the Middle East’s strategic geography. This is mainly due to the latter’s geographical proximity to both Europe and Africa, two key destinations for Chinese products and investments. Luckily for Beijing, its ambitions concur with the region’s desire to “look east.” Since the 2008–2009 financial crisis and 2010–2011 Arab Spring, many countries in the region have started looking beyond their traditional partners and allies in the West to engage with rising stars of the East, having reached out to China and its extended neighbourhood to revive ties that go back thousands of years.

A few Middle Eastern intellectuals, including professor emeritus of political science and Asian studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Yitzhak Shichor, ascribe China’s growing success to both the region’s strong economic and trade needs and Beijing’s hedging strategies over the past few decades.\(^{40}\) Zvi Barel, another research fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an editorial board member of \textit{Haaretz}, notes that, although expanding economically in the region almost without restraint, China maintains a low political profile which allows it to manoeuvre between conflicts without drawing fire.\(^{41}\) Mohammad Salman also contends that, since 1993, when China became a net oil importer, Beijing’s foreign policy has used strategic hedging to improve its competitive military and economic strength, while at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with the United States.\(^{42}\)

Most recently, many in the Middle East have perceived Beijing’s opening of its first overseas military base in Djibouti, which overlooks the strategically important Bab-el-Mandeb Strait separating the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden, as a clear signal of a more assertive China. However, although this base significantly increases its power projection capabilities in the Horn of Africa, Southern Arabia, and the Indian Ocean, Beijing’s military strength in the region remains far from that of the United States. Meanwhile, some contend that the huge gap with the American military might in this region is neither an immediate nor main concern

\(^{39}\) Mordechai Chaziza, “Religious and Cultural Obstacles to China’s BRI in the Middle East,” \textit{The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Perspectives Paper}, No. 1604, 12 June, 2020, https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-middle-east-obstacles.

\(^{40}\) Yitzhak Shichor, “Gains and Losses: Historical Lessons of China’s Middle East Policy for Its OBOR Initiative,” \textit{Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies}, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2018), pp. 127–41.

\(^{41}\) Zvi Barel, “Sin mafiyla et hayad hanalma bemiz’rach hatiykhon,” (“China is Using the Hidden Hand in the Middle East”) \textit{Haaretz}, 14 June, 2019, https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/. premium-1.7367574.

\(^{42}\) Mohammad Salman and Gustaaf Geeraerts, “Strategic Hedging and China’s Economic Policy in the Middle East,” \textit{China Report}, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2015), pp. 102–20.
of China. As the country grows ever more involved in the Middle East, Beijing is likely to look at the region with an interest that goes beyond the perspective of great power competition with the United States.\textsuperscript{43} Israeli economist Paul Rivlin, however, holds a different view, arguing that rivalry with the United States is and will remain the primary consideration for China as its relations with the Middle East evolve, largely due to the strategic paradox whereby Chinese oil supplies and other transactions have been overseen and, to some extent, protected by US forces in the Gulf.\textsuperscript{44}

Theoretically speaking, China’s interests overlap with those of the United States in regard to ensuring freedom of navigation, including the free flow of Middle Eastern energy resources to global markets, in addition to their officially declared goals of fighting terrorism, preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and resolving humanitarian crises in the region. In fact, as Shichor notes, there is “a relatively high convergence” between China and the United States’ attitudes, policies, and even behaviour, on a wide range of Middle Eastern issues.\textsuperscript{45} Nevertheless, convergence does not necessarily imply collaboration, and given Washington’s growing tendency to peg China as America’s number one long-term strategic threat, the United States is highly likely to politicise and meddle in economic and technological cooperation between Beijing and Middle Eastern countries. To be more specific, China insists that its trade with Iran conforms to UN resolutions, and that it is in line with Beijing’s political and economic interests.\textsuperscript{46} From Washington’s perspective, however, such cooperation often conflicts with the US interests, as it could undermine the effect of its sanctions on Tehran. The United States, therefore, continues to exercise long-arm jurisdiction in this regard. In the meantime, the US government, in the name of digital security and nuclear security, has also expressed concern about and attempted to obstruct a range of collaborative projects between China and its Middle Eastern partners to do with 5G, nuclear power reactors, and the Bei Dou Navigation Satellite System, all of which Beijing regards as completely normal business and technological activities.

In addition to managing direct pressure from the United States in the Middle East, China also encounters difficulties when dealing with many specific regional issues. Beijing must indeed face the conundrum of whether its efforts to strengthen relations with different Middle Eastern countries while forging balanced ties among regional rivals are sustainable for the foreseeable future. The Iran issue is

\textsuperscript{43} Manuel Almeida, “As US Power Wanes, Here Comes China,” \textit{Arab News}, 19 August, 2017, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1147076/columns.

\textsuperscript{44} Rivlin, “China.”

\textsuperscript{45} Yitzhak Shichor, “Sino-American Crosscurrents in the Middle East: Perceptions and Realities,” in Niv Horesh, ed., \textit{Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China’s Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 11.

\textsuperscript{46} Roie Yellinek, “How Can China Maintain Good Relations with Both Israel and Iran?,” Middle East Institute, 29 September, 2020, https://mei.edu/publications/how-can-china-main-tain-good-relations-both-israel-and-iran.
arguably the most prominent case. China has viewed Iran either as a vehicle to counter US influences in the Middle East, or as the jewel in the BRI crown, by virtue of brand new roads and railways that create a corridor from East Asia to Europe, the Arab world, the Black Sea region, and Africa, according to many Arab observers.\footnote{Baria Alamuddin, “China’s New Silk Road Passes through Tehran,” Arab News, 19 July, 2020, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1707056.} Beijing and Tehran are reportedly negotiating an agreement whereby China invests $400 billion over a 25 year period in Iranian petrochemical and infrastructure projects in return for access to Iranian oil at bargain basement prices.\footnote{Patricia Karam, “China Backs Iran in Times of Crisis,” The Hill, 4 January, 2021, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/532540-china-backs-iran-in-times-of-crisis; Ishaan Tharoor, “Trump’s Two Main Foreign Foes Plan a Major Pact,” The Washington Post, 14 July, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/14/trump-china-iran-pact.} Although such a deal could potentially alleviate the impact of Western sanctions and give Beijing access to states in Tehran’s orbit, whether China considers it to be a geopolitical game changer or merely a warning shot at the Trump administration is not clear. If the latter is the case, the coming to power of the Biden administration and possible easing of sanctions on Iran might engender changes in the current cooperative deals between Beijing and Tehran.

Meanwhile, certain Middle Eastern analysts also assert that Iran has become a strategic liability rather than a strategic asset, given that China deals with the Israelis as well as with many Arab countries. Beijing’s aims and methods in the region may well be incompatible with those of Iran, something that Arab researchers critical of Tehran contend may cast doubt on China’s ability to find accommodation with the majority of Iran’s regional policies—one of the greatest sources of regional instability. Manuel Almeida, former editor of Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, argues that Iran’s expansionist agendas are in glaring contrast to the basic principles of Chinese foreign policy.\footnote{Manuel Almeida, “As US Power Wanes, Here Comes China.”} Beijing’s dilemma and resultant hesitancy over this issue are also well-recognised among Iranian scholars. China expert at Tehran International Studies and Research Institute Ehsan Sadeghi Chimeh maintains that the PRC has been playing a double game in this regard that has generated considerable uncertainty in Sino-Iranian cooperation.\footnote{Ehsan Sadeghi Chimeh, “Ayande-ye ravæbat-e i’rân va chi’în dar partow-e tahavolât-e mantaghe-i’ va beynolmalalî,” (“The Future of Iran-China Relations in the Light of Regional and International Developments”) irdiplomacy, March 2016, http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1982182.}

Fundamentally speaking, the more China engages in various forms of economic activities in the Middle East, the more exposed it becomes to the consequences of political unrest, economic upheavals, sectarian violence, and religious tensions throughout the region, both on the interstate and domestic level. For example, Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi, Head of the Asian Studies Unit at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia, finds that the “Silk City,” one of the China-linked park-port complexes in Kuwait, has been
hampered primarily by the latter’s complicated political economy, drawn-out institutional infighting, and obscurantism geared towards protecting well-entrenched local interests.\(^5\) Therefore, in the process of steadily advancing its interests it is highly likely that, considering both the domestic rivalry within Middle Eastern countries and transnational conflict throughout the region, China will take great care not to choose sides.

Although cognisant that Beijing is unlikely to make any dramatic change of course in the short term, King Saud University professor of economics Noura bint Abdul Rahman Al-Youssef, along with other Arab analysts, nevertheless argues that China, with its status as the largest trading partner of most Middle Eastern countries, and as permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, has the potential to assume the role of moderator or peace broker in a wide range of geopolitical conflicts in the region, either between the Gulf states and Iran or between Israel and the Arab world, in the future.\(^5\) China’s rising involvement in the Middle East may have been less conspicuous and interactive when compared to that of a few extra-regional powers, such as Russia and France, but it is definitely of much greater importance in the long run.\(^5\)

**Major Domains of Asymmetric Competition in the Region**

Owing to distinctly different historical connections and the recent trajectories of Chinese and American policies in the region, as well as characteristics of the twenty-first century digital age, analysts generally agree that strategic interactions between Beijing and Washington in the Middle East should be quite different from the rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union in the region during the second half of the twentieth century. In the Cold War era, competition between the two superpowers in the Middle East was largely measured according to the size of their military bases, the power and loyalty of their regional allies and clients, and the number of local governments committed either to the American version of capitalism or the Soviet version of Communism. By contrast, “asymmetry” would arguably be the most prominent feature of Sino-US competition in the Middle East, at present and for the foreseeable future.

Originating in the fields of biology and business studies, the expression “asymmetric competition” relates to direct competition between two species or

---

51 Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi and Alanoud Alsabah, “‘Chinese’ Developmental Zones in The Gulf: The Case of Kuwait’s North Economic Zone (Silk City),” *Special Report*, King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, May 2020, http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/281.

52 Noura bint Abdul Rahman Al-Youssef, “Al-`alaqah al-taqiyyah bayna al-buldani al-arabiyyah wa al-si`n,” (“The Energy Relationship between the Arab Countries and China”) *Al-mustaqaabl al-arabiu* (Arab Future), No. 460 (2017), pp. 90–110.

53 DAC Research Group, “Al-Munafasa al-`istir`a`tiyya bayn al-si`n wa `amrikâ fi al-Sharq al-Awsat,” (“Strategic Competition between China and America in the Middle East”) The Democratic Arab Centre for Strategic, Political and Economic Studies, 6 June, 2018, https://democraticac.de/?p=54490.
entities that do not necessarily utilise the same types of resources, abilities, or approaches to occupy higher positions in a competitive hierarchy. The same logic could also apply to international relations.54 If a state does not possess sufficient national power to seek influence through primacy in all aspects, it can use asymmetric means through various channels to harass rivals, win concessions, and enhance its status.55 In the case of Sino-US rivalry, particularly in the Middle East, the two great powers have both the willingness and power to exploit their comparative advantages in order to be asymmetrically competitive in one way or another.56 As many Middle Eastern scholars and observers collectively identify, there are at least five major domains wherein China and the United States are competing, or will compete, asymmetrically yet fiercely, across the region.

54 Much attention was given to Brantly Womack’s concept of “asymmetry” in the interaction between states, which focuses on disparity at bilateral level, and sometimes in multilateral situations, as well as “asymmetric conflicts” between the smaller country and the larger side. See Brantly Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). More recently, a group of scholars have collectively delved deeper and further discussed asymmetric competition/rivalry in international relations, particularly based on a series of cases related to China and Japan. See Miwa Hirono, “Asymmetrical Rivalry between China and Japan in Africa: To What Extent Has Sino-Japan Rivalry Become a Global Phenomenon?,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No.5 (2019), pp. 831–62; Kai Schulze and Verena Blechinger-Talcott, “Introduction: Dimensions of Sino–Japanese Rivalry in a Global Context,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No.5 (2019), pp. 725–47; Kai Schulze, “Rivalry in the Middle East? Japan’s CEAPAD Initiative and China’s Rise,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2019), pp. 809–30.

55 Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2726.html.

56 I agree with Hirono’s observation and classification of different dimensions in “asymmetrical rivalry,” which includes quantitative, qualitative, and contextual senses. See Hirono, “Asymmetrical Rivalry between China and Japan in Africa,” p. 855. Moreover, based on the related theories from business studies in general and marketing in particular, I tentatively suggest adding more subdivided forms into the last two dimensions of asymmetric competition/rivalry in international relations. To be more specific, the distinction between strategy and tactics could be added into the contextual (behavioural) dimension: (i) Country A may compete with B in some domains but not others; and (ii) In certain domains of competition, Country A competes with B over certain attributes or aspects but not over others. On the other hand, in the qualitative (psychological) dimension, we might also distinguish between internal and external perspectives of competition: (i) Country A considers B as a competitor but B does not consider A to be a competitor; and (ii) Country A does not consider B to be a competitor, however, the third-party countries see A’s initiatives, companies, or technologies as competing with B’s. The concept and its variation in forms could be an issue area for future studies.
Access to Strategically Important Areas
First, access to strategically important areas in the region draws considerable attention from both Beijing and Washington’s decision-makers. There are intimations of asymmetry in the race to secure access to key cities, ports, or other transportation hubs, insofar as the United States often relies on military and political agreements to pursue undisrupted access rights, and China focuses on infrastructure construction, or commercial development with management rights.

As Ranj Alaaldin and Farhad Alaaldin have found, Washington tends to see the platform of bilateral strategic dialogue as core of a broader process aimed at settling various longstanding issues, including legal protection for US troops stationed in key locations of Iraq. 57 On the other hand, China has ploughed funds into creating a network of trade hubs and routes throughout the region that facilitate the westward transport of its goods. Chinese companies, moreover, have undertaken construction of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge over the Bosphorus, the Ankara–Istanbul high-speed railway, and renovation and expansion of various geographically important ports in Turkey, according to Altay Atli, a scholar at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. 58 Even in small countries like Lebanon, China has shown interest in key infrastructure projects such as expansion of the Tripoli port and Qalayat airport, as well as revamping the Beirut–Damascus highway. 59

As a more direct contrast, Hasan Alhasan, former senior analyst on foreign policy and national security at the Office of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Bahrain, notes that Washington has signed a military agreement with the Omani government granting the US Navy access to the ports of Duqm and Salalah, while Beijing has found its own way of making inroads into the Gulf states’ industrial and logistics sectors by developing an industrial city at the same Duqm port of Oman, in addition to a container terminal at Khalifa port in the UAE, as well as an industrial park in Saudi Arabia’s port city Jazan. 60

57 Ranj Alaaldin, “Kayfa Yanbaghi ‘alā al-Wilāyāt al-Muttahida Muqāraba al-Hiwār al-Istirāṭjī ji ‘ ma’ Iraq,” (“How should the United States Approach the Strategic Dialogue with Iraq?”) The Brookings Institution, 29 May, 2020. https:// brook. gs/ 306z60h; Farhad Alaaldin, “Iraq-U.S. Strategic Dialogue: Finding Agreement within Contention,” The Washington Institute, 18 August, 2020, https:// www. washingtoninstitute. org/ fikraforum/ view/ iraq- u. s. - stra tegic- dialogue- finding- agreement- within- contention.

58 Altay Atli, “Turkish Ports and China’s Maritime Silk Road: Expectations and Benefits,” Middle East Institute, November 2020, https:// mei. edu/ sites/ default/ files/ 2020-11/ A% 20Sea%20Change%3F- China%27s%20Role%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea. pdf.

59 Hussein Askary, “Lebanon Should Join the New Paradigm of the Belt and Road: But Watch Out for the War Party,” Executive Intelligence Review, 24 July, 2020, https:// larouchepub. com/ other/ 2020/ 4730-lebanon_ should_ join_ the_ new_ pa. html; Alamuddin, “Chinese and Iranian Vultures Circling over Beirut.”

60 Hasan Alhasan, “To Counter China’s Rise, US still Needs its Gulf Allies,” Asia Times, 16 June, 2020, https:// asiatimes. com/ 2020/ 06/ to- counter- chinas- rise- us- still- needs- its- gulf- allies.
Such asymmetry of strategy might be largely due to the fundamental difference between Chinese and US policy priorities in the Middle East, whereby the former pursues geo-economic influence, while the latter focuses on maintaining geopolitical dominance. The success so far of Beijing’s distinctive approach lies in the real need of Middle Eastern economies for advanced infrastructure, an area where Chinese companies have proven abilities. Lavi and Efron contend that Chinese involvement in building and operating such infrastructure stems from inherent economic advantages, including shorter construction times and relatively low costs. Consequently, the United States has little chance of direct participation in this competitive arena due to the associated advantages of Chinese infrastructure construction companies in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Washington is likely to persuade the relevant countries to axe Beijing’s participation in such projects and instead encourage domestic or third-country corporations to compete for them in efforts to preclude China’s successful bidding for more project contracts in the future. As former Al Jazeera producer and Palestinian-American analyst Ramzy Baroud argues, it was under US pressure that the Finance Ministry of Israel denied a Hong Kong-based company a massive $1.5 billion desalination plant contract, instead naming a local company as the winning bidder.

Security System and Military Sales
The second domain relates to security system and military sales, an area Washington has dominated for several decades. In the process of strategic re-trenchment, the United States maintains its alliance system in the region as core of its efforts to deter Iran and support Israel on security issues. Moreover, certain Middle Eastern analysts argue that, amid great power competition, Washington needs its close allies more than ever in order to contest Beijing; US security partners strengthen and amplify American efforts to influence how China identifies and pursues its interests, but acting alone diminishes the United States’s ability to do so. As arms are major components of Washington’s security ties with and commitments to the region, the United States sells large amounts of conventional weapons to its allies and also maintains a close defence relationship through frequent military drills and information sharing.

61 Lavi and Efron, “Foreign Involvement in Strategic Infrastructures Requires Clear Guidelines.”
62 For example, Lebanon’s labour minister Camille Abu-Suleiman, when echoing Washington’s narrative, warns of Beijing laying “debt traps” in infrastructure, offering quick loans at high interest rates, then seizing these assets when the country fails to repay the debts. See Alamuddin, “Chinese and Iranian Vultures Circling over Beirut.”
63 Baroud, “Israel’s US-China Balancing Act in Peril.” Nevertheless, Israeli officials played down the considerations of Washington’s concerns in the decision, noting that this plant seemed not at the forefront of American interests, see “Amid US Pressure, Israel Taps Local Firm over China for $1.5b Desalination Plant,” The Times of Israel, 26 May, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-us-pressure-israel-taps-local-firm-over-chinese-plant.
64 Alhasilan, “To Counter China’s Rise, US still needs its Gulf Allies.”
By contrast, the prospect of direct military cooperation between the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (CPLA) and regional players seems fraught with complex challenges and obstacles. The CPLA has only one military base in the region, located in Djibouti, and has so far conducted small-scale exercises with local military forces. Nevertheless, the Chinese skilfully present themselves as the interlocutors of choice in arms deals, and thus as an alternative to reliance on the West. Iran’s Centre for Strategic Studies research fellow Masoud Rezaei observes that, due to its own export regulations, the United States had difficulty in transferring certain weapons and military technologies to the region, China seized the opportunity and has since been selling millions of dollars’ worth of advanced drones and ballistic missiles to the UAE, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. China’s growth in the Middle East defence market has alarmed both the Pentagon and the American arms industry, Trump having already wielded presidential vetoes to defend further arms sales to Saudi Arabia from bipartisan legislation in the US congress.

Trade and Investment
Trade and investment is the third field of asymmetric competition. In view of the early 2020 COVID-19 outbreak in central China, Beijing’s leading role in trade with the Middle East has been challenged, and regional countries’ reliance on Chinese supply chains questioned, according to Mohamed Fayez Farahat, head of the Asian Studies Programme at Cairo-based Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. Nevertheless, given the spread of the virus and its variants to Europe, North America, and most other regions, Middle Eastern importers might have difficulty finding alternative suppliers with the same required technical specifications and strong and stable production capacity as China, and at such acceptable costs. In the meantime, demand and supply shocks due to the pandemic, along with a slump in oil prices, are likely to have severe impact on both trade flows and investor confidence in the Middle East this year and beyond. Therefore, loans—whether from Beijing or Washington’s FDI, or any of the international financial institutions headed by the two great powers—to Middle Eastern countries, oil-rich and war-torn economies alike, are crucial to covering their budget deficits and enabling realisation of their transformation and reconstruction plans.

65 Masoud Rezaei, “Raväbet-e Nežämi°-ye Êrän u Chi°n u Masäle-yi° be Näm-e Amri°kä,” (“Iran-China Military Relations and an Issue Called the United States”) irdiplomacy, 21 September, 2019, http:// irdiplomacy. ir/ fa/ news/ 1986393.
66 Catie Edmondson, “Senate Fails to Override Trump’s Veto on Saudi Arms Sales,” The New York Times, 29 July, 2019, https:// www. nytimes. com/ 2019/ 07/ 29/ us/ politics/ trump- veto- saudi- arms- sales. html.
67 Mohamed Fayez Farahat, “saläsilu al-ttawri’d wa‘azmatu küfi’d-19: al-mushkilätu al-rrähi- nah wal-ittijähätu al-mustaqbälîyyah al-muhtamaläh,” (“Supply Chains and the COVID-19 Crisis: Current Problems and Potential Future Trends”) Emirates Policy Centre, 26 April, 2020, https:// epc. ae/ ar/ topic/ supply- chains- and- the- covid- 19-crisis- current- problems- and- potential- future- trends.
To many observers in the region, China’s investment of hundreds of billions of dollars in reopening the old Silk Road constitutes its quest for present-day “commercial hegemony.” Muthanna Mishaa Al Mazrouei, professor of geopolitics at the Al-Mustansiriyyah University in Iraq, notes that a growing number of Chinese banks in the Gulf states offer the necessary financial mechanisms whereby local BRI-related projects may secure loans, so consolidating and expanding ties between Beijing and the Arab world. At the same time, however, the United States has every intention of slowing down China’s progress in this regard, such as by overturning the comprehensive cooperation agreements between regional players and Beijing, and emphasising the need for more diverse sources of funding. Farhad Alaaldin, head of the Iraqi Advisory Council and former political adviser to the President of Iraq, notes that in the second round of Iraq-US Strategic Dialogue the Americans made demands in regard to transnational finance, strictly conditional economic development, and ever-important issues like domestic security arrangements which the Iraqi government may find difficult to meet. As to interference in China’s trade with certain Middle Eastern partners, Washington has accordingly stepped in with trade actions and visa restrictions, and might also impose further sanctions on Chinese banks and other financial institutions, according to Dehqani. As part of its countermeasures, however, China’s central bank (People’s Bank of China) has accelerated implementation of digital currency programmes that may promote acceptability of the Chinese yuan (RMB) in Beijing’s future economic ties with foreign countries, including those in the Middle East.

Echoing Washington’s accusation regarding Beijing’s intent to exploit the weaknesses of fragile states, a few Middle Eastern analysts have indeed questioned the “real purpose” of Chinese overseas investment. For example, Alamuddin notes that China has created a succession of Asian and African dependencies by seducing states into unaffordable infrastructure projects and offering debt relief in exchange for surrender of sovereignty. Nevertheless, as University of Haifa faculty scholar, Yoram Evron finds, contrary to the assumptions of debt trap theory, whereby Beijing consolidates its long-term influence over weak countries through loans and investments they have no hope of repaying, Beijing’s investments in the eastern Mediterranean are in fact concentrated in the most stable countries of the Levant.

68 Muthanna Mishaa Al Mazrouei, “Al-Musārrat al-Jughrāfyya li-‘aqq al-Lu’ūl’ al-Ṣinī‘ wa-In‘ikāsātu hu al-Jiyūsiyyā‘iyya ‘alā Duwal Majlis al-Ta’āwun al-Khalījiyya,” (“The Geographical Paths of the Chinese String of Pearls and Its Geopolitical Repercussions on the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council”) Majalla Kulliyā al-Tarbiyya al-Talīyya (Journal of College of Education), Vol. 2, No. 38 (2020), pp. 703–18.

69 Alaaldin, “Iraq-U.S. Strategic Dialogue.”

70 Dehqani, “Negāhi‘ be Guži nehā-ye Āmriḵā barāye Tahriḵ-e Chi‘n.”

71 Baria Alamuddin, “‘Axis of Evil’ Asserts the Right to Pillage and Burn,” Arab News, 18 July, 2020, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1706731.

72 Yoram Evron, “China’s Involvement in the Levant: It’s the Economy after all,” The Asia Dialogue, 20 March, 2020, https://thiasiadialogue.com/2020/03/20/chinas-involvement-in-the-levant-its-the-economy-after-all.
Fossil energy, in particular oil and natural gas, is a key theme of international trade and investment in the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern analysts predict that China is and will remain reliant on this region for much of its oil import needs and, to a lesser extent, for gas. On the other hand, the United States has a lesser need for energy supplies from the Middle East as its domestic production continues to increase due to the “Shale Revolution.” Even so, Washington still attaches great importance to this energy-producing region, because it could affect global energy prices and put pressure on China’s energy routes. Nevertheless, Washington is unlikely to make direct use of the oil weapon to bring China to its knees, as long as Iran, in addition to Russia and Venezuela, pursues an independent policy in defiance of the United States, according to Tehran University professor Efandiar Khodaei and researcher Sayid Mohammadali Musavi.

High Technology for the Digital Age
The fourth competitive domain is that of digital age high tech, such as AI, 5G, clean or renewable energy, high-speed rail, quantum computing, and medical innovations. In light of the accelerating tech decoupling, the battle over technological supremacy is unlikely to be fought in China or the United States, but rather in other parts of the world far from Beijing and Washington, including the Middle East. As the United States still leads the world in many fields of science and technology, dispensing with American tech could make life very difficult for Chinese companies, according to Iman Fakhry, a researcher in the faculty of economics and political science at Cairo University. However, as Nabi implies, the Trump administration’s campaign against Huawei notwithstanding, the Chinese technology giant still has opportunities to continue expanding by virtue of the dozens of countries, whether developed or developing, to whom the building of its 5G network is an obvious choice. Mohammed Soliman, Cairo native and research fellow at Georgetown University, further suggests that should the Gulf States choose to maintain their relationship with Huawei, this would clearly signify the United States’ diminishing power over its allies.

73 Rivlin, “China.”
74 Sayid Mohammadali Musavi and Esfandiyar Khudayi, “Ravabet-e Amri’ka va Chi’n dar Khali’ j-e Fars: Hamkari’ yâ Taqâbel,” (“US-China Relations in the Persian Gulf: Cooperation or Confrontation”) Khareji’, Sâl-e Hashtum, Shumâr-e Yâ Aval (Foreign Relations Quarterly), Vol. 8, No. 1 (2016), pp. 61–88.
75 Iman Fakhry, “Hal talja’u baki’n li-ttafawudi ma’a wâshintun hawla ‘azmati ‘huwâwi’”, (“Will Beijing Resort to Negotiations with Washington about the ‘Huawei’ Crisis?”) Markaz Al-mustaqqbal (Future Centre for Research and Advanced Studies), 30 May, 2019, https://futureuae.com/ar/Mainpage/Item/4775.
76 Nabi, “sîrà’a al-jîl al-khâmis.”
77 Mohammed Soliman, “The GCC, US-China Tech War, and the Next 5G Storm,” Middle East Institute, 1 September, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/gcc-us-china-tech-war-and-next-5g-storm.
The competition between the PRC and the United States for technology partners and marketplaces in the Middle East does not depend solely on their own policies; it is also affected to a large extent by regional countries’ strategic options regarding either cooperation or competition. Syrian-Palestinian professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut Sari Hanafi holds that many Arab countries have interests in academic exchanges and cooperation with China and the West, albeit from a pragmatic angle, that is, focusing on the fields of hard science, technology, and engineering rather than in-depth critical thinking in social sciences.78 At the same time, and as most Arab analysts admit, when facing the two technology superpowers with their conflicting agendas, even rich GCC countries are cognisant of their inability, as regards innovation, to compete directly with either Beijing or Washington. Therefore, countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have hatched alternative plans to create an ecosystem for talent from these two countries and other parts of the world wherein to test thinking, implement ideas, and improve technology in AI, cloud computing, and storage, and biotechnology.79

Soft Power-Related Fields

The fifth area is that of so-called “soft power,” including culture, education, tourism, and, most recently, public health. On the one hand, the United States’ cultural activities in the Middle East have always drawn attention, as well as criticism. For example, having examined the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) “Teacher Training Programme” in the Middle East, Mayssoun Sukarieh, an anthropologist and native of Beirut, argues that the AFT, whose funding comes from the US Department of State, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the quasi-governmental National Endowment for Democracy (NED), is no more than a de facto tool to advance Washington’s foreign policy and imperialist agenda.80

On the other hand, many Middle Eastern researchers have also begun discussing China’s measures to strengthen its soft power. Sardar Aziz, political analyst and senior advisor in the Kurdish parliament in Iraq, finds that Beijing, no longer content with purely business interests in the Kurdistan Region, now promotes books translated into the Kurdish language on China and Chinese leaders, and that it is helping to build a centre for Chinese language learning at Salahaddin

78 Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, “al-Ta‘awun al-‘ilmī wa-l-Baṭh bayna al-Ǧīn wa-l-Watan al-‘arabī: Dirāsā Babliyūmāriya,” (“Scientific and Academic Cooperation Between China and the Arab World: A Bibliometric Study”) al-mustaqbala al-‘arabī (Arab Future), No. 483 (2019), pp. 49–66.
79 Caline Malek, “The Automation Game in the Gulf...It’s Time to Crack the Code,” Arab News, 3 October, 2018, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1381651/middle-east.
80 Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, “The American Federation of Teachers in the Middle East: Teacher Training as Labor Imperialism,” Labor Studies Journal, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2010), pp. 181–97.
University in Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{81} The Chinese government also has certain advantages over the United States and other Western countries in its cultural exchanges with Middle Eastern societies, in that it makes no attempts at cultural intervention or to moralise on human rights, feminism, or democracy, according to both Hanafi and professor of history at the Lebanese University Masoud Daher. Quite a number of Arab intellectuals, moreover, are seriously interested in the Chinese model of building internal unity and moderate modernisation without creating a conflict between heritage and modernity.\textsuperscript{82} In addition, Roie Yellinek, Yossi Manna, and Udi Lebel, scholars in Bar-Ilan University in Israel, refer to Chinese promotion activities in media, popular culture, and education in the Middle East as “Soft Power Pipelines Diffusion” (SPPD), arguing that such mechanisms greatly contribute to Beijing’s image in the region and thus to its “transformation into an attractive destination for cooperation in many soft areas.”\textsuperscript{83} Such progress notwithstanding, certain Middle Eastern analysts hold that the absence on the part of the Chinese of sufficient knowledge of religious matters and cultural challenges in the Middle East causes issues to arise regarding local regulations, and also sparks labour and commercial disputes.\textsuperscript{84}

The competition between China and the United States in public health is a whole new field created by the pandemic. Although Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO, America still has world-leading professional strength in medicine at both the academic and corporate levels. The last few months have also witnessed more frequent US public diplomacy activities in countries like Saudi Arabia that have been directed against China, which has visibly acknowledged various related aspects of COVID-19 since its outbreak.\textsuperscript{85} On the other hand, both the Chinese government and Chinese companies have been proactive in sending medical teams and aid to various Middle Eastern countries, providing

\textsuperscript{81} Sardar Aziz, “Navigating a Growing Chinese Influence in Iraqi Kurdistan,” The Washington Institute, 27 July, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/navigating-a-growing-chinese-influence-in-iraqi-kurdistan.
\textsuperscript{82} Hanafi and Arvanitis, “al-Ta‘awun al-‘Ilmi wa-l-Baith bayna al-Sin wa-l-Watan al-‘arabi‘”, Masoud Daher, “Af‘aq Wa‘ida li-l-Ta‘awun al-Thaqafi‘ bayna al-‘arab wa-l-Sin,” (“Scientific and Academic Cooperation between China and the Arab World: A Bibliometric Study”) Al Bayan, 28 March, 2012, https://www.albayan.ae/opinions/articles/2012-03-28-1.1619510.
\textsuperscript{83} Roie Yellinek, Yossi Mann, and Udi Lebel, “Chinese ‘Soft Power Pipelines Diffusion’ (SPPD) to the Middle Eastern Arab Countries 2000-2018: A Discursive-Institutional Study,” British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (2020), pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1732870.
\textsuperscript{84} Mordechai Chaziza, “Religious and Cultural Obstacles to China’s BRI in the Middle East.”
\textsuperscript{85} Jamil Al-Nimri, political and social analyst and member of Jordanian House of Representatives, notes that the US propaganda offensive in the Middle East and around the world to “hold China accountable” for the spread of coronavirus focus on Beijing’s “hiding of information and data” from the beginning due to its oppressive nature. See Jamil al-Nimri, “Jamil al-Nimri Yaktub: al-Harb al-Barida al-Jadida,” (“Jamil al-Nimri Writes: The New Cold War”) Alghad, 10 May, 2020, https://alghad.com/?p=837521.
video-teaching consultations with medical specialists, as well as launching unprecedented vaccine trials in the UAE. Washington’s response was to snub Abu Dhabi’s offer to test US diplomatic staff for COVID-19. This constituted a clear signal of concerns about the joint venture between the UAE government and Chinese genomics company BGI. Epidemic prevention and control could have been an opportunity for China and the United States to cooperate in providing public goods for the region, but it seems that the two sides continue to concentrate on their respective efforts to gain the advantage.

How Should Middle Eastern Countries Respond?

In light of the fierce asymmetric competition between China and the United States over a range of issues in the region, the vision behind the optimal response of Middle Eastern countries is now a heated topic of scholarly discussion. Middle Eastern scholars and observers have, according to their different nationalities and backgrounds, displayed diverse preferences and raised a wide range of suggestions that fall under three approaches.

The first approach advocates that Middle Eastern countries be more proactive in taking advantage of Sino-US contention. According to Yellinek, when great powers want to compete and expand their spheres of influence, smaller countries may in the process gain a great deal—and sometimes an inordinate amount—of attention. For example, Dal holds that, if Beijing still wants to secure Ankara’s interest in a strategic convergence with the BRI, Turkey should seize the opportunity to propose an agreement that gives it greater access to China’s domestic market. Mohammad Reza Ghaedi, an Iranian professor at the Islamic Azad University Shiraz Branch, proposes that Tehran should, “welcome and take advantage of” the escalation of tensions between Washington and Beijing, because such confrontation could divert much of the United States’ focus and pressure on

86 Nada AlTaher and Shawn Deng, “UAE and China Launch Phase 3 Clinical Trial in Humans for Covid-19 Vaccine,” CNN, 24 June, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/24/health/uae-china-human-trial-coronavirus-intl/index.html.
87 Simeon Kerr, “UAE Caught between US and China as Powers Vie for Influence in Gulf,” Financial Times, 2 June, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/1f119ff-50bf-8519-520b8db2082b. More recently, the UAE has become the first foreign country in the world to officially approve a Chinese vaccine for use against COVID-19, closely followed by Bahrain, Egypt, and Turkey, while many other countries in the region including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Qatar, and Kuwait have obtained or are expecting to receive their COVID-19 vaccine developed by American drug-makers Pfizer or Moderna. See, “Covid-19: UAE Rolling out Chinese Vaccine to All Citizens and Residents,” Middle East Eye, 22 December, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/covid-uae-chinese-vaccine-citizens-residents.
88 Roie Yellinek and Elizabeth Chen, “The ‘22 vs. 50’ Diplomatic Split between the West and China over Xinjiang and Human Rights,” China Brief, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 19, No. 22 (2019), p. 24.
89 Dal, “‘Belt and Road’ Project.”
the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Middle East towards the PRC and East Asia.90 Hasan Sadiq, meanwhile, emphasises the lessons and opportunities that a Sino-US “technology war” might provide for the Arab world, especially in regard to introducing advanced technology, absorbing foreign capital, and attracting a return of talent from the Arab diaspora.91

A few Middle Easterners go further, suggesting that regional countries should unequivocally side with either one great power or the other without delay. On the one hand, some argue that it is high time Middle Eastern countries curtailed their crippling dependence on the West’s endless cycle of exploitation and turned to emerging players such as China, with whom they might enjoy a more balanced, mutually respectful strategic partnership. Aijaz Syed, a Gulf-based analyst, contends that the oil-producing nations in the region must invest in the building of institutions and infrastructure, including those related to Beijing’s projects for a “new Silk Road,” which will secure a better future for the coming generations and create a more just world.92 On the other hand, certain observers call for a united front between regional countries and those in the West led by the United States in the rebuilding of a Middle East that imbues freedom, democracy, and pluralist ideologies.93 From a more realpolitik perspective, Yaacov Ayish, a former Israeli Defence Attaché to the United States and Canada, urges the Israeli government to support decisively Washington’s efforts to face down Beijing, as sustained US global and regional dominance would serve both America’s interests and those of Israel.94 Moreover, as Alhasan points out, although some Gulf States might have little interest in being drawn into the fray and set against Beijing, they should nevertheless firmly and clearly prioritise their strategic partnership with Washington, because their specific security needs more or less guarantee the long-term demand for a trusted US presence.95

In contrast to the first category of policy suggestions, analysts taking the second approach treat the issue of Sino-US rivalry with more caution, arguing that such an emerging great power competition could induce uncertainty and instability in the region. Therefore, Middle Eastern governments should lay low amid the emerging Sino-US confrontation and adopt the strategy of hedging against risks.

90 Mohammad Reza Ghaedi and Seyyed Mehdi Habibi, “Jāygāh-e īrān dar reghābat-e vāshangton va pekan,” (“Iran’s Position in the Competition between Washington and Beijing”) irdiplomacy, 26 June, 2020, http:// irdiplomacy. ir/ fa/ news/ 1992614.
91 Hasan Sadiq, “Sībaq al-Dhukā’–al-Istīnā’ī”:: Ayna Taqifu al-Duwāl al-Kubrā,” (“Artificial Intelligence Competition: Where is the Position of Superpowers”) Al Arab, 20 November, 2019, https:// alarab. co. uk/ node/ 205631.
92 Aijaz Z. Syed, “New Silk Route to a More Just World,” Arab News, 20 May, 2012, https:// www. arabnews. com/ new- silk- route- more- just- world.
93 Baria Alamuddin, “China’s New Silk Road Passes through Tehran.”
94 Yaacov Ayish, “Israel Must Partner with US in Power Competition with China,” The Jerusalem Post, 6 October, 2020, https:// www. jpost. com/ opinion/ israel- must- partner- with- us- in- the- great- power- competition- with- china- 644668.
95 Alhasan, “To Counter China’s Rise, US still Needs its Gulf Allies.”
This group of scholars contends that nearly all Middle Eastern countries, in particular the traditional allies of Washington, hope to maintain distance from this so-called new Cold War. Since business with and investment from both China and the United States is welcome, a number of US partners have begun hedging their bets and pulling their punches on China-related issues. Many analysts, even when criticising Beijing’s behaviour, suggest in the same breath that economic ties with China should continue and flourish.\(^9^6\) Moreover, Gedaliah Afterman, Head of the Asia Policy Programme at the Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Centre (IDC) Herzliya in Israel, proposes that, in light of the ongoing great power competition, smaller powers should consider creating new forms of coalitions, such as technology alliances based on innovation or city diplomacy.\(^9^7\)

Some suggest that retaining cooperation with both Beijing and Washington is the best hedging strategy. For example, UAE science and technology sectors are concurrently working with China’s BGI on the construction of a COVID-19 test laboratory and with NASA on a spacecraft mission to Mars.\(^9^8\) Similarly, as part of efforts towards the Saudi Vision 2030 reform plan, the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority signed Memorandums of Understanding with IBM in areas of AI on healthcare, with Alibaba on smart cities technology, and with Huawei on Arabic-language recognition, respectively, on the same day.\(^9^9\) Therefore, Middle Eastern countries arguably hope to find a higher level of ambiguity, that is, larger room for manoeuvre or interpretation, when interacting with both great powers.

Although common wisdom traditionally claims that those adopting the hedging policy are usually in pursuit of strategic ambiguity, some now argue that such a method might no longer be viable in the current situation, and that Middle Eastern countries should embrace a policy of “strategic clarity” that makes explicit how they intend to deal with Beijing and Washington. For example, Lavi and Efron propose that, beyond the need to prevent a crisis with Washington, it is important that Israel, first and foremost for itself, sharpen and clarify its constraints regarding the involvement of foreign companies in the country’s infrastructure. Known limitations and clear and transparent considerations will make it easier

\(^9^6\) Editorial, “China Has Proven to be a Bad Actor.”
\(^9^7\) Gedaliah Afterman, “How Other Countries Can Survive the US-China Competition,” *The Diplomat*, 1 February, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/how-other-countries-can-survive-the-us-china-competition.
\(^9^8\) Tariq Al-Faham, “G42 and BGI Announce Groundbreaking High Throughput Detection Lab to Fight COVID-19,” *Emirates News Agency*, 31 March, 2020, http://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302834140; Frank Gardner, “UAE Mars Mission: Hope Project a ‘Real Step forward for Exploration’,” *BBC News*, 8 June, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52973849.
\(^9^9\) Yousef Saba and Saeed Azhar, “Saudi Arabia Signs MoUs with IBM, Alibaba and Huawei on AI,” *Reuters*, 22 October, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-techn/saudi-arabia-signs-mous-with-ibm-alibaba-and-huawei-on-ai-idINKBN2771ML.
for smaller countries in the region to preserve their independence, and also allow them to continue cultivating vital but asymmetric ties with both the United States and China.\(^{100}\)

The third category of observer believes that the Sino-US conflict is a danger to the global economy and regional security. Middle Eastern countries, therefore, should take the initiative to help reduce hostility between the two great powers. In the view of some Middle Eastern scholars, Sino-US rivalry in general and the trade war, in particular, have worsened the global economic slowdown, and hence harmed regional development. Throughout the twentieth-century Cold War, the US policy of strategic containment against the Soviet Union was arguably practical and successful. But this solution is no longer feasible, because in the current digital age, and amid the era of globalisation, a new Cold War with China will have no winner.\(^{101}\) Many analysts in the Middle East admit that, in contrast to the expectation that a common threat to human beings might reduce tension among nations, COVID-19 has rather increased hostilities between the United States and China. Yet they nevertheless insist that the COVID-19 outbreak has tied the revival of global economy to the need for cooperation between national units and within international organisations. Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, the GCC Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Negotiation, emphasises that the United States has been a security and strategic ally of GCC countries for decades, not to mention a partner in economy and higher education. On the other hand, China is the GCC’s top trading partner, with expanding political and security ties. That the GCC is essentially close to both Beijing and Washington, therefore, is only to be expected, while at the same time both great powers need the GCC as a source of energy and thriving market for their products. Therefore, as Aluwaisheg suggests, the GCC should not only be working to enhance its partnership with both countries, but also doing more in the current situation to bridge the growing divide between China and the United States and encourage a more cooperative approach.\(^{102}\)

In all three categories mentioned above, it should be noted that far more Middle Eastern observers suggest the first two approaches rather than the last. The reason for this is that most Middle Eastern intellectuals believe that as either structural or domestic factors are the root cause of Sino-US competition, there is little Middle Eastern countries can do to reverse the trend. In fact, most analysts suggest that regional countries’ decision-makers observe, and preferably internalise, the recent change in both the Chinese and US perspectives before taking any action.

---

100 Lavi and Efron, “Foreign Involvement in Strategic Infrastructures Requires Clear Guidelines.”

101 IRNA, “Atash-e Afruzi-ye Kurunâ dar Munâsebeh-e Chîn u Āmri‘kâ,” (“Fire in China-US Relations during the Epidemic Era”) 12 May, 2020, http://www.irm. ir/ news/ 83782524.

102 Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, “China-US Rivalry Needs Defusing to Revive Global Economy,” Arab News, 2 June, 2020, https://www. arabnews. com/ node/ 1683726.
Conclusion

Since Donald Trump took office as the 45th president of the United States, Middle Eastern countries have found themselves increasingly in the crossfire between Washington and Beijing. To exacerbate matters, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought the simmering conflict between two great powers into the open as a potential “New Cold War.” What are the major drivers and essence of this Sino-US rivalry? What might China and the United States compete for in the Middle East? Will Washington’s allies in the region have to decouple from Beijing? Or can they simultaneously manage relations with military superpower the United State and economic giant China? These are just a few of the questions that Middle Eastern scholars and observers try to explore and answer.

Some analysts in the Middle East consider Beijing and Washington as two largely “homogeneous” extra-regional powers competing in international politics, economy, and technology; others emphasise their “heterogeneity,” arguing that the essence of Sino-US confrontation lies in the clash of two models. Although there is a near-consensus in the Middle East that Washington’s influence has waned over the past decade in contrast to Beijing’s growing presence, there are divergent views on whether the American strategy, following the re-trenchment could still defend allies, attract partners, and deter foes. Observers also wonder whether China has the capability to manage the conflicting political agendas among its economic partners, and to secure its international trade routes that pass through the region in light of an open conflict with the United States.

Sino-US rivalry provides the essential framework wherein an asymmetric competition will unfold and prevail in different issue areas. Since neither Washington nor Beijing has yet established absolute supremacy in the region, in the eyes of Middle Easterners, both countries will try to maximise their comparative advantages and compete asymmetrically in at least five domains. They include the access to strategically important areas; security system and military sales; trade and investment; high technology for the digital age; and the soft power-related fields.

Based on their different understandings of the opportunities or challenges that the emerging Sino-US rivalry engender, Middle Eastern observers raise many different policy suggestions, and debate whether the regional players should proactively take advantage of this great power competition, cautiously hedge against strategic uncertainty and risk, or constructively help reduce the hostility between the United States and China. Calculating their national interests and managing the potentially challenging effects of their choices in light of great power competition, in particular keeping themselves from being drawn into unwanted conflicts, is likely to be a major focus of statecraft of Middle Eastern countries in the foreseeable future.

While Middle Eastern intellectuals’ understanding of Sino-US rivalry and its impact on the region is complex and diverse, an analysis of their observations and discussions may contribute to an understanding of the forms and impact of Sino-US rivalry across the world. In contrast to the Indo-Pacific or Europe, which have so far received the most attention in heated debates on the strategic competition between Beijing and Washington, the role and perspectives of the Middle East in
regard to this rivalry remain underestimated and understudied topics that need more scholarly attention. Although some categorisations and generalisations about Middle Eastern countries can also be regarded as applicable to other regions, the distinctiveness of the Middle East in regard to Sino-US rivalry is nonetheless striking:

First, nowadays the Middle East is arguably the world’s most tumultuous region, plagued as it is with sectarian violence, ethnoreligious conflicts, and political uncertainty. It is consequently more vulnerable than other regions to the spillover effects of competition between extra-regional great powers.103 Secondly, the Middle East, geographically speaking, is far distant from both Beijing and Washington, but its regional affairs are in one way or another closely related to the two countries’ domestic politics, most notably the influence of the Jewish community in the United States and the issues of the Muslim minority in China. Therefore, both Beijing and Washington have all the more reason to proceed with caution when engaging with the region, given the various domestic incentives and constraints that figure in this process. Thirdly, numerous cases of conspicuous contradiction and “abnormality” may be observed in the current relations between the region and the two great powers, respectively. For example, the United States has a strong military presence and alliance system in the Middle East, yet the region is also site of possibly the world’s strongest anti-American sentiment. At the same time, China has become the largest trading partner and investor in most Middle Eastern countries, but its security role in the region is still largely marginalised by other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Fourthly, when formulating their upcoming policies in the Middle East, both Beijing and Washington’s policymakers still face seemingly unsolvable dilemmas. For China, rapid advances in the Middle East may diffuse some of the pressure exerted by the United States in East Asia, but such moves entail intensive investments of political, economic, and military resources, and could well eventuate in undesirable regional entanglements. On the other hand, the United States’ retreat from the Middle East and pivot to Asia might facilitate its efforts to counter China’s rise as a regional hegemon in the Western Pacific, but its ceding control of the key transcontinental region in Afro-Eurasia would force many American allies to rethink their strategic alliances with Washington.104 When considering these aspects as mentioned above, the Middle East is a very complex, if not the most complex region in regard to Sino-US rivalry. In light of the great

103 As “a region without regionalism,” the Middle East is a complex composition of middle (and small) powers competing with each other, and thus lacks a stable regional hierarchy or a viable security structure. See Paul Aarts, “The Middle East: A Region Without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism?,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (1999), pp. 911–25; Mehran Kamrava, “Hierarchy and Instability in the Middle East Regional Order,” *International Studies Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2018), pp. 1–35.

104 Jamil Anderlini, “China’s Middle East Strategy Comes at A Cost to the US,” *Financial Times*, 9 September, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/e20ae4b9-bc22-4cb5-aaf6-b67c885c845c.
power competition between China and the United States, therefore, an exploration of the complexity of perceptions and reactions of third-party countries in the region carries considerable significance.

The rivalry between China and the United States preceded COVID-19, and will survive it. Although Biden’s victory in the presidential election opens the door to greater predictability in Sino-US interaction, the deep tension and mistrust between Beijing and Washington are not likely to go away under the new administration, and the consequences of great power competition will continue to spread well beyond the bilateral relations.105 Under such circumstances, scholars’ more rigorous analyses of what the future interaction between the PRC, the United States, and the Middle East might look like or how it might unfold is imperative. However, that neither China experts in America nor Chinese researchers on the United States are particularly familiar with Middle Eastern affairs is more or less almost common knowledge, and that many Middle Eastern intellectuals’ understanding of those issues related to China comes disproportionately from Western scholarship or media reports is also well-recognised.106 Therefore, scholars and observers in China, the United States, and all Middle Eastern countries should make efforts to strengthen direct communication with more first-hand information in order to provide intellectual support, preferably in a rational and constructive way, that will empower all sides towards more skilful manoeuvring of the uncharted waters of great power competition in the digital age.

105 For example, according to former foreign minister of Egypt Nabil Fahmy, irrespective of a second Trump term or a Biden administration, control over maritime waterways would become a source of contention between the United States and China in the Middle East in the medium and long terms. See Nabil Fahmy, “Short Perspectives on the United States’ Foreign Policy in the Middle East after the November 2020 Presidential Election,” The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, Fall 2020, https://www.thecairoreview.com/midian/short-perspectives-on-the-united-states-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-after-the-november-2020-presidential-election. See also Jacky Wong, “The U.S.-China Tech War Won’t End Under Biden,” The Wall Street Journal, 14 December, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-china-tech-war-wont-end-under-biden-11607939918.

106 In addition, Mohammad S. Alzou’bi, a research fellow at Rasanah (International Institute for Iranian Studies), notes that due to the economic vulnerabilities and poor conditions of regional countries during the pandemic, Middle Eastern think tanks face severe challenges nowadays. However, new communications technology as well as the need of Middle Eastern governments and elites for new knowledge on modernity and international affairs might also present new opportunities of academic and scientific research institutions within the region. See Mohammad S. Alzou’bi, “Middle Eastern Think Tanks in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Challenges to Opportunities,” On Think Tanks, 17 August, 2020, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/middle-eastern-think-tanks-in-the-post-covid-19-era-challenges-to-opportunities.
Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. For exceptional assistance, the author also thanks participants in the “China and the United States in the Middle East” research group. The research on this article is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (19CSS037).