



U.S CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ASSESSING THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW GLOBAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the implications of the increasing U.S. China rivalry in the Middle East and the competition contribution to a reconfiguration of the international system. Historically the United States has greater control in the region compared to all other states but Chinese presence is being built through channels of trade and investment. The recent Israeli and Iranian conflicts reveal the limits of American control. The ongoing violence is pushing the ever-increasing competition of great powers and the global instability of energy into the dominant discourse of international relations. For the time being Chinese interests in the region have been protected by a policy of guarded diplomacy while American interests have required greater military involvement. This is reflective of a shift from a unipolar international system to a multipolar international system. The Middle East is becoming increasingly important in demonstrating the new world order of irregular antagonistic and competitive systems of greatest powers.

Keywords: Strategic, Competition, Implications, Reconfiguration, Diplomacy, Multipolar, Antagonistic, Great Powers.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The growing strategic rivalry between United States and China has become one of the prominent provisions of the modern international relations as the manifestation of the more general changes in the world balance of power in the twenty first century. Although this rivalry initially focused on the Asia Pacific region it has over time extended to other geopolitically important regions especially the Middle East which has been a strategic region since it has vast energy reserves, major trade routes and due to unending security dilemma. In the past, the United States had been dominant in the region by military force political affiliations and economic power particularly during the post-cold war period. Nevertheless, over the past few years changing priorities at home, strategic exhaustion by long-standing conflicts and a slow change of focus to great power competition in other areas have helped to redefine the U.S. involvement in the Middle East relatively. At the same time, China has gradually become a more prominent player with economic programs investing in infrastructure and diplomatic efforts becoming a major external player without necessarily threatening the U.S. military hegemony. The increased overlap of U. S and Chinese points of interest has made the Middle East a significant front in the U.S. China strategic conflict. This conflict is characterized by economic and diplomatic posturing rather than military confrontation.

Given the attempts of regional states to balance the activities of the two competing powers without creating an over dependence the shifting dynamics of global politics poses a number of important questions. In view of these circumstances examination of U.S. China relations in the

Middle East provides the opportunity to understand the changes occurring in the region and to assess the prospects for the international system for a new global order characterized by multiple centers of power and competitive interdependence. The U.S. has a long history of asserting its dominance on the international theater in general and more specifically in the Middle East. This dominance is the result of an extensive U.S. security architecture active U.S. military engagement and an elaborate network of alliances. This particular role has been undertaken by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War. Washington has been the main external regional security guarantor, and has established major military bases in the states including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain, where the U.S. Fifth Fleet is docked. It has strengthened its strategic alliances (especially with Israel and Gulf monarchies) via defense agreements sales of arms and intelligence collaborations. This supremacy was further reinforced by direct military intervention in the wars like the Gulf War and the Iraq War that highlighted the ability of the U.S. to exert power and influence the regional outcomes. According to Council on Foreign Relations the United States has long been the main security provider in the Middle East and it has become entrenched in the geopolitical structure of the region (Council on Foreign Relations 2021)

Over the past few decades China has gradually been increasing its presence in the Middle East becoming a major economic and diplomatic player. Compared to the security driven strategy of the United States China has focused on trade related energy relations and infrastructure building being the main trading partner of various states of the region. With plans like Belt and Road Initiative Beijing has put a huge capital investment in ports rails and industrial zones that have enhanced its economic presence in countries such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. China has also taken a more active diplomatic approach, including mediating the normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023. The Brookings Institution states that this increased involvement of China is indicative of a strategic initiative to increase its global presence by economic statecraft and pragmatic diplomacy a significant change in Middle Eastern geopolitics (Brookings Institution, 2023). The Middle East holds a strategic place in the world because it is a convergence of geographic economic and geopolitical factors of worldwide concern. The region is a strategic crossroads between Asia, Europe, and Africa and plays an important role in global trade and energy transit where the most important maritime chokepoints including the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal can ensure much of the oil supply in the world. It has become the center of energy security and economic stability to the global community due to its huge reserves of hydrocarbon especially in nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq.

Simultaneously this area has been marked by centuries of geopolitical struggles and alliances both between the Arab and Israelis and between regional powers that still determine the dynamics within the area and the interventions of the outside world. These issues have solidified the Middle East as a critical conflict zone for major global powers. Competing for control foreign powers especially the United States and China have aimed to meet their strategic ambitions through military economic and diplomatic activities in the Middle East. The International Energy Agency (2022) cites the region's importance to global energy markets, while F. Gregory Gause III and others acknowledge the strategic resources of the Middle East the changing power relations within and beyond the region and their effects on contemporary geopolitics and world order (Gause, 2019). The form of competition between China and the United States in the Middle East is best described as multidimensional. This goes beyond traditional military competition as it includes the economic technological and diplomatic aspects.

Traditionally the United States has relied on a strong military presence a network of security alliances and a superior degree of political influence to maintain primary dominance in the region such as the web of military alliances with its key allies and troops stationed in the Gulf. Washington has created the position of a primary security provider in the region through its long-standing partnerships with Israel and Saudi Arabia. In contrast China has adopted a different method through economic statecraft and practical diplomacy. This has increased China's presence through its investments in energy trade and infrastructure provision particularly the Belt and Road Initiative. The non interference policy of China means that it can engage with all regional actors including its rivals and remain outside of regional conflicts. This new form of competition is no longer only limited to the relations of hard power. It is now also characterized by technological cooperation digital infrastructure and diplomatic mediation as a manifestation of an even broader competition to influence the order and governance in the region. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (2023) describes the differing approaches of the United States and China in the Middle East as asymmetric and using the respective elements of their strengths. The former uses its security system while the latter uses its economic integration along with a position of political neutrality. This is a demonstration of the complex nature of the great power rivalries which involves many different and overlapping factors.

The dynamism in the regional politics of the Middle East is indicative of a tendency towards the diversification of foreign policy by the states which has increasingly been based on the multi alignment of foreign policy instead of exclusive reliance on one great power. The countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and United Arab Emirates are gradually striking a balance between the United States and China, using both of them to optimize their strategic independence and economic advantage. Instead of taking sides these states are at the same time preserving security relationships with Washington but expanding economic and technological relationships with Beijing which is a conscious policy of hedging and diversification. The trend is an indicator of more general loss of unipolar domination and the opening of a more multipolar regional system where local actors have more agency in the formation of external alignments. The growing involvement of China in the region is not merely driving U.S. influence out of the region according to scholars but rather it is creating a trend of what is known as multi alignment where the Middle East countries develop overlapping relationships with multiple world powers in order to mitigate dependence and increase their geopolitical power (Mahmood & Askari, 2024 Blarel, 2024). This dynamic change highlights the essential change in the geopolitics of the region where the competition of the great powers is not imposed but mediated by the strategic decisions of the states of the Middle East themselves. A new global order in the Middle East is the gradual transformation of a unipolar system of the United States to a more multipolar world where power is becoming more diffuse with multiple actors including the increasingly powerful China. During a large part of the post Cold War era the United States was enjoying unmatched political, military and institutional primacy, influencing regional security structures and global standards. Nevertheless, this order is currently changing where China is expanding its influence by engaging in economic activities diplomatic ties and strategic alliances without necessarily challenging the U.S. influence in the military arena.

The Middle East has become one of the places where this change is especially obvious as the regional states become more involved in interaction with both of the powers and adjust to the more complicated external environment. This change begs a key analytical question is China essentially changing the rules and institutions of the international system or is it mostly acting within the current U.S. led order and selectively extending its influence. The new world order as

(G. John Ikenberry 2018) argues is not defined by the replacement of one hegemon by another but is a tussle and renewed order where the upstart powers challenge and coexist alongside the old norms and institutions. This study investigates whether rising China U.S competition is effecting a structural break in the global system, or if this is simply a revision of the dominant system influence patterns. Given the Middle East strategic geopolitical positioning this study examines three major components of competition security, economic and diplomatic. In the context of security this study analyzes the long-term position of the U.S. military and defense alliances in the context of economics the growing presence of China is analyzed in terms of trade energy relations and infrastructure and in the context of diplomacy this study analyzes how both great powers instrumentalist regional political actors and international relations. Combined the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the competition between great powers. Finally, this research is guided by the following principal question the Middle East a region of new international orders or a region of existing international orders where the dominant relations of a passive character are revised

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The increasing competition between the United States and China in Middle East has raised pertinent questions of changing global power dynamics although the overarching consequences of the same have not been well comprehended. When the United States still maintains its dominance via security and armed dominance China becomes increasingly influential in terms of different economic and diplomatic interactions that yet offer new complexities that are not well encompassed within the current literature. Furthermore, not much has been done to explore how regional states manage and influence this competition, by using multi alignment policies.

In turn it is not completely clear whether these transformations bow down to the development of the new global order or it is merely the transformation of the existing system which necessitates a more integrated and multidimensional analysis.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the implications for U.S. China strategic competition on the geopolitical map of the Middle East?
2. Is this growing competition between the U.S and China in the Middle East a new global order?
3. How are the Middle Eastern states trying to work out a balance between their ties with Washington and Beijing in a new multipolar world?
4. Does the concept of Developmental Peace in China centered on economic stability and non interference obstetrically substitute the U.S. Liberally peaceful model of global governance to a emerging global governance coalition among local dictators?

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To test the major dimensions of the U.S China strategic rivalry in the Middle East.
2. To evaluate how this rivalry is a new global order pattern in regional politics.
3. How countries in the Middle East manage their foreign policies in response to the U.S. China rivalry.

1.5 Significance of the Study

It considers receptive views of the dynamism of great power rivalry in the Middle East and global order. Thus, this study is of great value through the analysis of the functions of the United States and China in the security economic and diplomatic aspects the study aims to offer a more comprehensive approach on how power is counterbalancing in a strategically important area. It further underlines the active participation of Middle Eastern states in this

competition via multi alignment strategies as opposed to passive reaction to external influences. This way the study provides precious knowledge to international relations scholar's policy makers and strategic analysts who seek to know whether the current trends are a prelude to a new world order or an improvement of old structures in the changing environment.

1.6 Scope and Limitation

The current study is confined to discussing the changing competition between United States and China in the Middle East in terms of security economic and diplomatic aspects. It will take into account the main actors in the region like Saudi Arabia, Iran and United Arab Emirates so as to comprehend how states in the region relate to both powers using strategies of multi alignment. The research relies mostly on secondary literature and the current events especially ever since the post Cold War era but recognizes the constraints of availability regarding the real time policy formulation and the classified information. It does not thoroughly examine domestic politics within a country or detailed military activities but rather focuses more on general geopolitical dynamics and their consequences to the new global order.

1.7 Literature Review

M. Munir and A. Safdar (2023) in their research article Sino U.S. Strategic Competition in the Asia Pacific omnidirectional Hedging of Traditional Middle Powers do provide a complex exploration of the ways in which the growing rivalry between China and the United States is refining the nature of regional diplomacy. Continuing the discussion past the dichotomy of either one side or the other the authors suggest that the traditional middle powers of Japan, India and Australia are more adopting an approach of omnidirectional hedging.

This multi dimensional strategy entails both diversifying diplomatic ties and developments in economic relationships on the basis of frameworks such as the CPTPP and also enhancing security through mini lateral alliance such as the Quad to ensure that either of the superpowers cannot trap each other. This article identifies how more active roles of the states (both positive and negative) can be represented as active stabilizers to the extent that their inter relationships mitigate the chances of direct conflicts. Munir and Safdar use modern theories to describe real policy behavior effectively and draught a realistic and convincing way to see the sadistic survival of the middle powers in the divided Indo Pacific.

In the research article titled Growing Strategic Competition Between the US and China rise of China Irfan Ali and Rubina Ali (2021) thoroughly examine the changing balance in the global power structure as a result of the rapid economic and technological rise of China. The paper based on the analytical framework of Power Transition Theory examines how both the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and the Made in China 2025 plan threaten U.S. hegemony by making use of the critical areas of such initiatives gives subsequent reactions in U.S policies such as the B3W initiative and the Strategic Competition Act of 2021. The authors elaborate how this rivalry is multifaceted in terms of ideological disparities over liberal democracy and digital authoritarianism security issues concerning South China Sea as well as an intense competition over technological superiority in various fields such as AI and 5G. Although the article agrees that the current bilateral relations are typically perceived in terms of a zero sum concept the article draws a conclusion that stability of the international system hinges on whether the countries are able to find a way through to a mutual trust and cooperation so as not to face a hegemonic collision that could destroy the world order.

Dr. Mariam Tahir (2024) in her research article the Implications of Expanding China US Political and Strategic Influence in the Asia Pacific discusses the will to power between the United States and China as they take the regional leadership. According to the study such competition is

guided by an inherent human and state policy to gain power and a classic balance of power dynamic is created where the U.S. opposes the increasing military and economic might of China. Tahir focuses on the influences of this rivalry on different regional actors and institutions, and she notes that the U.S. aiming to preserve its historical hegemony by employing strategic alliances uses its huge size in the region to show that China is also very powerful. According to the article this theatre of competition is intricate and it implies that the kind of strategic decisions taken by these two superpowers will end up transforming the political domain of the Asia Pacific. This book chapter review focuses on the article of the book *The Upside of US Chinese Strategic Competition* titled *International Order Transition and US China Competition* where the authors are Kai He and Huiyun Feng (2025).

By putting forward a subtly different manner of analyzing shifts in the world the authors attack the classic Thucydides Trap narrative (according to which an up-and-coming power and an established one inevitably go to war) by presenting a more subtle understanding of global processes. He and Feng believe that an international order transition cannot be driven by a change in power (the power pillar) but must include essential changes in the institutional pillar. The unpacking of these two pillars leads the chapter to hypothesize that although vigorous strategic competition is an irresolvable fact of reality the notion of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) actually deters the real military confrontation. Rather the authors emphasize that the competition has shifted to the institutional balancing game where the United States and China compete to have a sense of influence and representation in and through international organizations under the security economic and political suborders. Finally, the work does not only raise the emphasis on the inescapable kinetic struggle but does offer a theoretical framework of how strategic rivalry may come to be directed through international institutions to influence the future regional and world order.

The academic article is called *US China Rivalry and the Future of Global Security* by Md. Ridad Howlader (2026) offers a projection of the changing international order in response to the increasing strategic rivalry between the United States and China and in particular how emerging technologies of the new world order are transforming our view of international politics. Relying on qualitative analysis of documents and elite interviews the author claims that competitive supremacy in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, 5G and the like serves as a strategic multiplier that intensifies both the military and economic tension existing between the Indo Pacific. The paper notes the increasing normative fragmentation in which global governance is dysfunctional with the introduction of a parallel standards of technology and the presence of rival economic blocs. Howlader arrives at the conclusion that although Indo Pacific countries are now seeking pragmatic hedging options in order to preserve their strategic autonomy the continuing nature of this bilateral competition is threatening to bring the global security system to the next level of polarization and instability with digital and geopolitical iron curtain.

Report the Great Fragmentation The rise of Middle Powers in a fractured international order released by the Institute for Economics and Peace (2026) offers a factual explanation of the changes in the world over the years due to the loss of the unipolar world. The paper posits that due to the internal and external restraints of the old time might of the United States and China a wide range of different actors (so called Middle Powers) such as India, Turkey and Indonesia are gaining more and more prominence and imposing their strategic independence. The report recognizes the role of these emerging actors in seizing the vacuum created by the retrenchment of the superpowers by analyzing the three pillars of power (military, economic, and diplomatic) with most of them not necessarily being loyal to their traditional blocs but

rather pursuing their national interests. The findings suggest that despite challenges to global security and normative consistency posed by this fragmentation, opportunities for regional leadership will likely emerge to create a more complex but stronger international order.

1.8 Research Gap

Al Jazeera's (2022) work on the U.S. China strategic rivalry in the Middle East seeks to understand a complex part of a larger geopolitical confrontation involving the two superpowers and builds upon existing literature in a meaningful way. The study is thorough in its critique although there is significant room for development. The study is right to focus on the elements of strategy and politics but the fallout of the energy politics in the wake of the Ukraine situation pre-existing economic connections and the reactions of Middle Eastern countries are also important considerations that were left out of the study.

The study also fails to address how prevailing multipolarity transitional energy markets and the Belt and Road Initiative impact the global and regional order between the years of 2022 and 2025. There is also a lack of analysis of realism, neorealism, and the power transition framework to a certain extent where the analysis fails to explain how strategic restructuring in the international order is likely to shape the interests and end goals of the major powers in the Middle East.

1.9 Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative research to gain an understanding of the strategic competition between the United States and China in the Middle East and its implications for a new world order. The research focuses mainly on discourse analysis to examine the political economic and strategic discourse of both states about the Middle East. Secondary sources and official documents such as policy papers government statements national security strategies diplomatic speeches energy reports and publications by international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) are used to collect data.

1.10 Theoretical Framework

Grounded in Neorealism (Structural Realism) this study analyzes how the distribution of power and the anarchic nature of the international system shape the strategic competition between the United States and China in the Middle East and how this rivalry influences the emerging international order.

1.11 Neorealism

Neorealism or Structural Realism was founded by Kenneth N. Waltz who was one of the first notable American authors on International Relations. His book tries to est. a formal explanation for the theory of International Politics published in 1979. According to Neorealism the International System as a whole defines the nature of states' behavior in a much stronger sense than the leaders' personality or the internal politics of the states. In Neorealism the international system is described as having no apex order due to the absence of a global government. Neorealist hold that order in a system is defined relative to states and in the absence of a global government, states are responsible for their own security and their own survival. States work to maintain their status and to safeguard their national interests.

Assumptions

Anarchy

Neorealism shows how the world works in a state of anarchy. There is no central power that can bring states to order for the sake of peace, develop laws that can bind states, and enforce security on a worldwide scale. In a domestic context a government provides order by the use of laws and authority that can compel. There is no such thing as a global government. Anarchy

does not mean chaos. It means that there is a balance of power among states. All states are independent, sovereign and equal. Because of anarchy states have to deal with unceasing uncertainties about the plans and activities of other states. For this reason, states have to be prepared to respond to a threat at any moment. Anarchy serves as the most important condition that addresses the insecurities and fears of states and determines the level and nature of competition among states. (Snyder, 1991)

States as Primary Actors

In neorealism, the focus is primarily on sovereign states as the dominant actors in global politics. While transnational actors such as international organizations, multinational corporations and non state actors are important in world politics states are the ultimate possessors of political power and the principal actors in decisions on political issues especially on questions of national security, foreign policy and other political issues that concern the strategic interests of the state. States are sovereign, control a defined territory and have a right to the legitimate use of force. This gives states the ability to act in the international system as they see fit. From a neorealist point of view the activities of international organizations and other actors are the outcome of the interests and the power of states. Therefore, when analyzing global politics, the most important focus shall be on the actions of states particularly those states that have the most power and the most influence on the structure and the state of the world system.

Survival as the Operative Principle

As proposed by neorealism, the anarchic character of the international system leads every state to treat the preservation of their existence as their highest priority. As there is no highest order of the international system that is able to ensure the security of states they must in order to survive and avoid being destroyed ensure the preservation of their sovereignty territorial integrity, political independence and national security. Even though states pursue economic development, ideologies and diplomatic relations with other states these pursuits must be secondary to the basic need for survival. The ever-present danger of external threats forces states to adopt policies that improve security and ensure their survival. The neorealist framework asserts that survival is the primary concern of every state and the most important factor in the rivalry with other states for security and since states have an inherent right to self defense for the enhancement of their power and influence in the international system. Protective self interest compels states to improve their security and therefore their position in the international system and to make their potential enemies as vulnerable as possible.

Self Help System

The concept of self help is of particular importance to neorealist theory as an inevitable product of the anarchic quality of the international system. Where there is no central body to provide protection or guarantee the security of states the states of the world cannot depend on one another to defend and maintain their existence. They must rely on their resources which may be military, economic, technological etc. As the world is made up of a number of independent states the role of alliances and international institutions may be temporary. For a neorealist they provide a very optimistic, yet temporary benefit. States are inherently self interested and therefore states are in a perpetual state of seeking to grow their own power and self interest. The self-help system describes a world where states keep a large standing military seek alliances and remain cautious of other states in a perpetual state of competition. (Layne, 1993) - p. 26

The Distribution of Capabilities

According to neorealism the distribution of capabilities and power of states essentially shapes the structure of the global system. The positioning of states and the means with which they pursue their goals are shaped by their military, economic and technological capabilities. The distribution of capabilities in the international system is continuously changing which leads to more intense competition among the great powers and changes in the system's balance of power. (Powell, 1991) p. 18

Balancing Behavior

The absolute dominance of any one state is something the rest of the world seeks to avoid. The most common method of maintaining the balance of power in international relations is either the internal strengthening of a state's capabilities or the creation of alliances to strengthen the capabilities of the state even more i.e. external balancing. (Grieco, 1988)

Relative Gains

The most important part of hegemony in neorealism is that with their relative gains they are better off than with absolute gains. They may benefit from cooperation but if they do not benefit more than a rival state then the cooperation is not worth the shift in the greater competition they will be facing. (Mearsheimer, 2001)

In this research Neorealism is used to examine the strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Middle East. According to Neorealism, in the absence of a world government states are compelled to act in a self-help way and seek power and hegemony in order to defend and promote their national interests. The presence of China in the Middle East can be understood in the context of expanding China's economic, political and strategic interests in Middle Eastern region which is of great geopolitical significance due to its trade routes and energy. On the other hand, the United States wants to retain its influence and position in the region seeing China's rise as a challenge to its interests and its role as the leader of the world. Neorealism points out that in the case of change in the distribution of power among the major states the rivalry and competition of states increases as they seek to obtain security and prevent other states from obtaining a decisive advantage. This means that in the Middle East the relative decline of the United States and the rise of China have caused great power competition. Neorealism also illustrates the strategic partnerships of the two states and strengthening their positions in the region to prevent strategic disadvantages.

Neorealism further sees balancing behavior as an example of regional countries altering their alliances and foreign policies in response to the shifting power distribution between the United States and China. Hence Neorealism contributes toward understanding the emerging patterns of the U.S China conflict in the Middle East and how those patterns relate to the regional stability and power politics as well as the growing multipolarity of the international system.

To grasp the dynamics of competition between the U.S. and China in the Middle East today we can look at Neorealism. In the international system there is no single authority which can set the rules and ensure safety so states are mainly concerned with themselves with that in mind its no surprise that the U.S and China are battling it out in the Middle East where it sits on significant resources and is politically and economically valuable. The U.S has been doing its best to protect its authority by keeping its footprint and influence in the region by setting up military bases developing relations with the Gulf monarchies and controlling trade and security lines especially in the Middle East oil trade over the last few decades. China on the other hand has been trying to enhance its position by tapping into the Middle East resources through the BRI building the infrastructure of the Middle East and establishing economic partnerships to secure the energy resources. Therefore, realism views BRI and other initiatives as rational and

for the purpose of achieving a country's self interest and enhancing its power. The Middle East has become an important battleground for the U.S and China to strengthen their presence and ties in the region and improve their influence. (Mearsheimer, 2001)

This rivalry can be further explained by the Neorealism more specifically the work of Kenneth Waltz who focuses on the structure of the international system instead of the internal attributes of states. In Neorealism the allocation of power in the global system determines the nature of state behavior and patterns of cooperation and conflict. Washington and Beijing have “strategic competition” because after the end of the Cold War the international order was becoming more multipolar or bipolar which has increased it. Washington and Beijing have strategic competition because after the Cold War the international order was becoming more multipolar or bipolar. The Middle East is a pivot area in which the structural changes in the world of politics are evident. The United States' military alliances and security pledges continue to assert its strategic dominance while China's increasingly prominent economic ties investments in technology and diplomatic role play in the international arena pose a threat to the traditional U.S strategic position. Neorealist claim that ideology and domestic politics play little role in this competition and that the major powers resort to it only because it gives them relative gains and prevents other powers from achieving regional dominance. The dynamic U.S. China competition in the Middle East thus illustrates how shifts in the international system affect state actions and alter international power dynamics. (Walt K, N 1979).

1.11 Organization of the Study

This thesis has been organized into six chapters that interrelate and discuss in detail the U.S. strategic competition with China in the Middle East and its effects on the new world order. The background of the study, the definition of the research problem, its importance, the scope and limitations gaps in the literature, the theoretical framework, and the overall structure of the thesis are outlined in

Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

Chapter 3

The United States in the Middle East presents an overview of the history of U.S. involvement,

Chapter 4

China's Expanding Role in the Middle East

Chapter 5

Emerging Dynamics of Competition and the New Cold War Narrative

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Policy Implications

1Chapter 2

The U.S. in the Middle East

The geopolitical importance of the Middle East and the abundance of energy resources coupled with a complicated security situation have made the region a focal point in the United States foreign policy. U.S involvement in the region has changed since the middle of the twentieth century, marked by a shift in economic interests (especially oil access) to a wider agenda of political alliances, military interventions and counterterrorism actions. The American policy was largely influenced by the goal of containing the influence of the Soviets during the Cold War and the post Cold War period was characterized by the rise of direct involvement particularly after the Gulf War and the events of the September 11 attacks.

The U.S strategy in recent decades has shifted significantly and is marked by both shifts in administrations between Barack Obama and Joe Biden and changing priorities of the global agenda in favor of great power competition. Meanwhile the US is experiencing threats to its conventional dominance in the region through the war fatigue the emergence of regional powers and the increasing role of foreign powers like Russia and China. As a result, the U.S approach toward Middle East policy has become more and more defined by strategic recalibration which seeks to achieve equilibrium between long term interests and the changing dynamics in the world. (Quandt, 2005)

2.1 Historical Overview of US Engagement in Middle East

The past century's U.S. relations with the Middle East have been shaped by trade evolution energy considerations, geopolitics, and military actions. Initially U.S involvement in the Middle East before World War II was limited to the establishment of trade relations, oil exploration and the Arabian American Oil Company investments in Saudi Arabia. It was primarily commercial in nature. After World War II the interests of the region in U.S foreign actions expanded significantly. U.S interests in the Middle East became closely aligned with the region's energy resources and strategic geography positioned at the center of multiple regional conflicts. President Franklin D. Roosevelt made the first of many summer meetings with Saudi Arabia's King Abdulaziz at the S.S. Quinnebauga U.S. Navy warship off the Jidda coast in 1945.

This was the beginning of a formal strategic partnership with the U.S regarding oil and security. (Brown, 1984) U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East during the Cold War was motivated primarily by the desire to thwart the spread of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the U.S partnered with Iran under the Shah, Saudi Arabia and Israel and frequently intervened in a number of regional wars. For example, the U.S and the British orchestrated the Iranian coup in 1953 to protect the interests of the U.S through the protection of oil interests. The Cold War saw the highest number of Americans involved in the Arab, Israeli wars the 1956 Suez Crisis and the Gulf War in which the U.S assembled a coalition to remove Iraq from Kuwait. The interventions cemented the U.S as one of the leading authorities in the region (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007).

After the Cold War the U.S involvement in the Middle East became increasingly militarized and the events of September 11, 2001 shifted the U.S objectives from Gulf War to the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S objectives were to protect oil interests and advance U.S regional interests to thwart the spread of terrorism. Again, the U.S created anti American sentiment as a consequence of the invasions, and U.S dominance in the region shifted from territorial to Gulf countries. The U.S continued geopolitical protection to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar with military bases while the U.S built arms agreements to protect the Gulf countries. The current case of U.S relations in the Middle East show an influence of overseas energy changes power competition and the international power shift towards Asia. We see the US all but leaving the Middle East in military presence in a fraction of what it used to it be yet it is at the forefront of military and strategic diplomacy in the region while still playing an integral role in the Gulf of Southern Arabia. Additionally, the U.S is diplomatically balancing relations with the Gulf. Weaning off (relatively) of Gulf oil and increased domestic oil production tapered this need. Even with the shift to a balanced U.S oil production the Middle East is vitally import to stability of the world energy and shipping especially the Gulf of Hormuz U.S relations with the Middle East shifted from an international controlling gas board of energy (and military) to a controlling gas board of energy (and military) to a shift of a support of strategic guidepost relations with balance of military control and of a counterpoint of a military dominance to one of diplomacy (Ryan, 2009)

2.2 Early Involvement Pre World War II

Even prior to World War II the United States maintained a lackluster largely indirect presence in the Middle East and the region immaterial, cultural, and commercial dealings. United States interests were not politically or militarily articulated. American missionaries and educators as well as philanthropic organizations created connections and initiated institutions which opened schools, hospitals and colleges. These became the venues of cultural exchanges. They were soft power instruments that linked the United States to the region and on the whole attempted to counter the direct geopolitical dominance of the United States. In economic terms U.S participation was initially small but grew steadily during the early twentieth century as the American oil giants started to appreciate the potential of the region both in terms of its petroleum resources and specifically in the Persian Gulf. This increased attention to energy resources was a small yet significant change towards engagement in a strategic manner since the question of access to oil became more and more associated with industrial development and the issue of national security. Although this was an emerging economic interest the United States was still a second fiddle in the region as compared to European colonial powers like Britain and France whose mandate and imperial influence prevailed over Middle Eastern affairs during this period. However, the bases of the missionary work the growth of commerce and the first oil concession were to help a more direct and detailed U.S participation later after World War II when the balance of forces in the world changed dramatically. (Langer & Gleason, 1953)

2.3 The expansion after the World War II

After World War II the United States became the world superpower and it began to increase its presence in the Middle East quickly changing the limited presence previously to a long-term strategic interest. This was significantly influenced by the fact that the region had massive oil deposits that were crucial to the rebuilding of Europe expansion of the world economy and the U.S industrial supremacy. With the waning influence of British and French powers following the war the United States took on more and more of the role of determining the political and economic destiny of the region. One of the major factors of this growth was that close bilateral relations were established with strategically vital states especially Saudi Arabia and Iran during Shah Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The basis of these alliances was the oil for security model whereby the United States offered military and political assistance in exchange of steady energy resources access. The March 1945 Presidential meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia allowed the solidification of this arrangement and thus, the start of a long-standing partnership that tied American security assurances to Gulf energy supplies.

Meanwhile the growing rivalry between the U.S and the Soviet Union in the Cold War greatly influenced U.S participation in the region by elevating the Middle East into a significant geopolitical battlefield. The American policymakers tried to avoid the spread of the Soviet by aiding friendly regimes reinforcing military alliances and safeguarding that the vital states were within the dominance of the West. This approach was a mix of economic interests especially the need to obtain oil concessions in the form of companies like ARAMCO and a wider ideological and security agenda connected with the policies of containment. The Truman Doctrine and policy of strategic doctrines supported the idea that the Middle East instability could pose threats to the world balance and Western interests. Consequently, the United States was slowly becoming entrenched in the politics of the region which preconditioned the long-term military presence cooperation in intelligence and the formation of alliances. It was a turning point in U.S foreign policy thus as the Middle East turned into a core of global policy and no longer the periphery of a limited involvement. (Kimball, 1991)

2.4 The Cold War Period (U.S. in the Middle East)

The policy of the United States in the Middle East during the Cold War was firmly entrenched in the larger context of the geopolitical struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States making the Middle East a major player in the game of strategic politics. Containment keeping the influence of the Soviets out of strategically important states and securing Western access to energy resources was the main goal of U.S foreign policy of this era. To do this the United States sought an intervention mix of both direct and indirect intervention which comprised military alliances economic assistance espionage missions and pro western regime support. The 1953 Iranian coup d'état was a turning point in this strategy when the U.S and Britain conspired to overthrow the prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh who had decided to nationalize the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. The reestablishment of Shah Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi strengthened a pro western authoritarian regime that was quite aligned with the U.S strategic interests and especially in securing oil resources and countering Soviet expansion. This incident turned out to be a hallmark of Cold War interventionism and long-term views of the U.S interventions in the region. (Feis, 1960)

Besides Iran the United States also increased its influence through the development of alliances with regional powerhouses and incorporation of Middle East into its international security system. Such countries as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey were made the key pillars of the U.S regional policy as they were provided with military support and economic assistance in return to their political alignment. The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 further solidified U.S commitments to the region. With this doctrine U.S aid would be given to any Middle Eastern country resisting communist threats. In what would become an Eisenhower Doctrine trend the U.S perceived the instability of the Middle Eastern region as a direct threat to global energy and the West as a whole. As a result, the United States started creating a more permanent military and diplomatic presence which marked a transition between the intermittent involvement to the long-term strategic presence (Brands, 2014; Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

Altogether the Cold War era was the time of the even greater involvement of the U.S in the Middle East which was accompanied by the combination of ideological rivalry alliances and covert operations. The official reason was the necessity to contain communism although in reality the U.S activities were also closely connected with the energy security issues and the need to remain dominant in the region. This two-fold incentive led to a trend of interventionist policies that would still affect U.S relations with the Middle East into the post Cold War era. This epoch has left a trace in the form of long-time alliances and the ongoing conflicts that shape modern politics in the region. (Gasiorowski, 2004; Brands, 2014)

2.5 Post Cold War Era (1990s)

The conclusion of the Cold War brought about a major change in the international system as the United States became the only superpower and played a more direct and aggressive role in the Middle East. During this unipolar moment U.S foreign policy became more oriented towards the preservation of regional stability safeguarding of energy flows and the deterrence of the emergence of hostile regional powers. One such incident was the 1991 Gulf War when the United States led an extensive international alliance at the bequest of the United Nations to drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait after Saddam Hussein invaded the nation. The operation proved the level of U.S military capacity and its readiness to exercise power to protect international norms and strategic interests. It also reaffirmed the significance of the Persian Gulf as a key region in the overall energy security of the world and the role of the United States as the major guarantor of regional stability (Freedman and Karsh, 1993, Hinnebusch, 2003).

After the war America greatly enhanced its military presence in the area and created bases and continued to have a permanent presence of troops especially in Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia

and Kuwait. This forward deployment would have served to deter future aggression contain Iraq since it was under continuous sanctions and such a response would have been rapid in case of future conflicts. This increased presence however came with its own political repercussions especially in the Arab and Muslim world whereby it was increasingly regarded as an act of external intervention and occupation. The ongoing sanction regime of Iraq in the 1990s further led to humanitarian issues and increasing anti American sentiment in some sectors of the region. Nevertheless, the United States continued to pursue a twin policy of containment and deterrence based on military dominance and economic coercion to balance the threats in the region without engaging in any massive ground operation (Pollack, 2002, Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

Overall, the time after the Cold War made the United States the number one power in the Middle East and showed the signs of what could happen because of leaving the military in the area for long periods of time. The Gulf War did make the United States control of the situation in the region stronger but keeping sanctions and troops there was a good way to show the world the complicated issues of controlling the region in such a tense and difficult situation. This time was the foundation for many of the problems of this type of situation especially after 9/11 when things like intervention and resistance to control became really important.

2.5 Post 9/11 Era (War on Terror)

The shift in U.S foreign policy after the September 11 attacks represents a particular point in history for the Middle East. At this time the primary focus of U.S foreign policy was counterterrorism and most of the operational activity was framed around U.S national security interests. The response was the War on Terror which in its initial phase involved the U.S invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The removal of the Taliban who hosted al Qaeda also meant that for the first time the U.S policy in the region shifted from deterrence to active involvement through military occupation and the beginning of a nation building project. U.S policy shifted again in 2003 this time to the invasion of Iraq. The removal of Saddam Hussein was the first major tipping point in the Middle East that in addition to Iraq sparked insurgency and then civil war and sectarian violence which spread across most of the other states. It is argued that these interventions not only eroded U.S strategic credibility and reputation in the world but also left the U.S on the deep end of the pool in the region (Bacevich, 2016, Pape, 2005).

This time frame also saw the evolution of US institutional response and the doctrine of foreign policy after 9/11. U.S foreign policy became more interventionist and a more preemptive and security driven posture of U.S policy was given bolstered focus to counterinsurgencies and authorize regime changes. However, the extensive warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated the limits of large-scale nation building incurring significant international and domestic criticism. These wars were costly in terms of human financial and political costs which led to the development of war fatigue in the United States leading subsequent administrations to rethink the viability of the widespread military presence in the Middle East. Meanwhile the emergence of non state actors like al Qaeda and eventually of ISIS proved that security threats were shifting away and conventional interstate warfare were replaced by asymmetric warfare and transnational terrorism. (Bunzel, 2015, Cleveland and Bunton, 2016)

In general, the post 9/11 era can be viewed as the peak of the U.S military role in the Middle East as well as the inception of the new strategic evaluation. Although the early policies were to eradicate terrorist threats and transform the politics of the region the long-term results expressed a long run instability and little success in bringing long run political change. Consequently, the period preconditioned further changes to less involvement in military affairs

and instead more diplomacy and regional alliances in later U.S presidents (Bacevich, 2016, Cleveland and Bunton, 2016).

2.7 U. S Strategies of the Current Administrations.

The strategies of the U.S in the Middle East have changed tremendously since the times under the recent administrations due to the shifting global priorities and regional challenges. Although core interests like stability and security remain constant each administration Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden have done so in a unique way. Obama has focused on strategic recalibration with less military presence and more diplomacy Trump has pursued an America First policy with more pressure on adversaries and Biden has focused on strategic recalibration with less military involvement and more diplomacy. This segment simply looks at the dissimilarity of these approaches and how they affected the U.S policy in the area. (Overy, 1995)

2.7.1 Barack Obama

When U.S policy in the Middle East is discussed under the presidency of Barack Obama, it is characterized by a deep focus on diplomacy and multilateralism, which can be discussed as a shift in the U.S strategy in the Middle East toward the focus on diplomacy and multilateralism. This strategy has been most prominently exemplified through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) a landmark agreement that was negotiated with Iran and major world powers to limit the nuclear program of Iran in exchange of sanctions relief thereby reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation and regional conflict. The general foreign policy of Obama was also aimed at minimizing the large scale military involvement in the area and focusing on diplomatic solutions and burden sharing with the allies instead of prolonged ground involvement. This multilateral diplomacy and moderate military stance were a major reorientation of the U.S policy in his presidency.

2.7.2 Donald Trump

With the rise of Donald Trump to power the U.S strategy in the Middle East has changed to a unilateral and assertive approach to national interests rather than multilateral commitments. This was best exemplified by the U.S withdrawal of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the subsequent implementation of a maximum pressure campaign which imposed far reaching economic sanctions meant to isolate Iran and curb its nuclear ambitions. Simultaneously Trump sought diplomatic realignment of the region through diplomatic efforts such as the Abraham Accords which normalizes Israeli Several Arab state relations. However this aggressive strategy contributed to heightening tensions with Iran which resulted in direct military confrontations. Most recently this resulted in a continuing conflict characterized by U.S and allied attacks against Iranian targets to further Iranian nuclear and military capability. By the year 2026 this even more intense conflict scenario shifted to a dangerous standoff punctuated by aggressive acts of hostility disruption of global energy transport particularly through the Strait of Hormuz and periodic diplomatic efforts. All of this underscores the even greater risks and consequences of an ever more militarized U.S. Iran relationship.

2.7.3 Joe Biden

U.S policy in the Middle East under the leadership of Joe Biden has been defined by a process of strategic recalibration to optimize regional involvement with the wider global interests. This has involved a planned drawdown in troop presence especially in long standing war zones as a result of a shift in posture in regard to security. Concurrently the administration has been trying to rejuvenate its diplomatic process including making efforts to re engage with Iran in its nuclear talks and seeking to strengthen partnerships through multilateral frameworks. Key to this recalibration is a wider reorientation of U.S foreign policy towards great power

competition in particular with China, which has increasingly influenced decisions related to resource allocation and strategic focus. Taken together these factors highlight a shift away towards intensive regional intervention to more of a balanced and globally integrated policy framework.

2.8 Fading Dominance & Strategic Recurrence.

The idea of the decline in U.S dominance in the Middle East combines structural and strategic factors that have evolved over the last two decades and changed the way Washington views the Middle East. One of the most important of these factors has been what some have called war fatigue. This has been the result of the significant cost to the U.S of prolonged war in Iraq and Afghanistan including the loss of U.S personnel dwindling financial resources and the loss of political capital as well as the declining support of the U.S public for extensive military operations outside of the U.S The Middle East region has become less important to the U.S economically as it has become less dependent on the oil of the Middle East particularly with the U.S shale oil boom. The already increasing influence of regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey has made the regional order increasingly multipolar in the context of declining U.S global dominance. Military interventions economic investments and diplomatic efforts of Russia and China have exacerbated the competition of major powers in the region. The U.S has responded to these changes with adjustments in its strategies that have included high levels of military interventions and the sharing of military burdens with allies combined with limited military operations against regional terrorism and refocused diplomacy

Chapter 3

China's Expanding Role in the Middle East

Chinese presence in the Middle East has increased significantly in recent years because of their continued economic interests juxtaposed with the increasingly strategic positioning of China in the region. There are many aspects of these interests connected to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI allows China to engage in one of its main economic diplomacy strategies to facilitate further investment through large scale infrastructure projects. The BRI has a near direct correlation to the Middle Eastern countries' industrialization through increased infrastructure and manufacturing as China has financing and investment capacity and Middle Eastern countries are the largest suppliers of oil and gas. The development of partnerships has built China's importance to the financing and developing of infrastructure of economic interdependence as well as stability of the region and economic reform.

Beyond just the economic elements China has expanded its role to incorporate political, technological and security elements. China has gradually increased its diplomatic focus and added layers of cooperation particularly in technology such as telecommunications, digital infrastructure and surveillance letting them extend their control over new governance frameworks. Concurrently China has increased its investment in soft power such as cultural exchanges education and development assistance to create enduring relationships. In the context of weapon sales joint military exercises and mediation China has adopted a gradual approach to security cooperation. This flexible method increases the application of China's preferred strategic elements particularly when China remains the least active player and when direct military intervention is not necessary. The influence of China's approach to the Middle East in an increasingly multipolar regional system demonstrates its growing presence. (Alterman, 2019)

3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic diplomacy

The Belt and Road Initiative is an international development program initiated by China to enhance international trade and connectivity by massively investing in infrastructure energy

and transportation networks. It is directly related to economic diplomacy where China uses trade agreements financial cooperation and development loans to establish long term political and economic relationships with partner countries. In the Middle East the BRI is also important to increase the influence of China by financing the major infrastructure and energy projects and intensifying the cooperation with the resource rich states. Economic diplomacy also ensures that China attains credible energy supply in the region as well as it enhances its strategic presence in major trade routes making the Middle East a strategic point in its global connectivity vision.

3.1.1 Reliable Alternatives

G7 infrastructure programs including Build Back Better World and the EU Global Gateway have been developed to balance the financing created by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and offer alternative financing for strategic infrastructure. They are designed to raise public and private financing to close the global infrastructure gap and offer the developing world options that prioritize governance environmental impacts and sustainable debt.

Despite the significant impacts of the initiatives many commentaries cite the inability for the initiatives to directly compete with the scale and velocity of Chinese funding and point to implementation gaps coordination issues and a lack of funding commitment as critical concerns. Additionally, some scholars note that while these frameworks are presented as transparent and sustainable the actual impacts similar to the initiatives as a whole depend on the delivery of the projects and not intentional political branding (Summer 2016).

3.1.2 Strengthening Domestic Governance

One of the best long-term policies that countries can adopt when they are involved in large external financing systems like the Belt and Road Initiative is strengthening domestic governance. Governments can bargain more balanced and transparent contracts that clearly define debt obligations cost of the project and the terms of repayment. Increased transparency measures including public disclosure procedures of agreements public bidding procedures etc can be used to minimize information asymmetry and limit the risk of unfavorable or non-competitive deals. Moreover, strong anti corruption systems and external control institutions hold individuals accountable in the execution of the project and eliminate chances of elite capture or mismanagement. Effective governance structures also enhance the bargaining power of a country since it can now relate with external partners such as China on a more equal terms as opposed to being in a dependency position. Finally resilient institutions would not only serve the national economic interests but would also make sure that foreign investment will cause no long-term fiscal or strategic vulnerability (Rolland 2016).

3.1.3 Diversification of Economic Partnership

The main approach to overdependence on one external financier and the negotiation strength of a country in global development projects is to diversify economic partnerships. The states can incorporate a greater range of actors such as advanced economies such as Japan and members of the European Union resource rich Gulf States and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. This diversification distributes financial risk promotes competition among lenders and tends to result in more favorable terms of loans increased transparency and higher standards of the projects.

It also enhances economic resilience as it will ensure that the change in the policy or funding capacity of one partner does not greatly disrupt national development plans. In the end, a multipolar financing model will increase the level of strategic autonomy as well as decrease the risks of economic dependence on a single power. (Keohane und Nye 1977)

3.1.4 Regional Corporation

Regional cooperation is essential for both the advancement of infrastructure projects and the reduction of dependence on external financial models such as the Belt and Road Initiative. With integrated regional infrastructure planning neighboring countries can streamline and integrate transportation energy and trade networks avoiding planning fragmentation. This also strengthens the group's bargaining position as regional blocs are more likely to negotiate better financing terms than if the countries planned individually. An advantage of a coordinated economic model is that it enhances the efficiency of infrastructure and is less vulnerable to the influence of external actors as demonstrated by the initiatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU) among others. Long term economic stability and integration are supported by the shared financing mechanisms and cooperative transnational development projects regional cooperation fosters. Indeed, continuous collaboration is essential for the ability of countries to establish infrastructure that addresses regional needs rather than foreign needs. (Hirschman, 1945)

3.1.5 Sustainable and Debt Management

To achieve sustainability and debt management it is necessary to focus on these countries when large scale infrastructure financing is implemented under various programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Although the debate over so called debt trap diplomacy is a contentious issue there is consensus among the international financial institutions that unsustainable borrowing and poor project assessment can put countries in the long run into fiscal risks. To overcome these challenges governments must ensure that they engage in rigorous cost benefit analysis before they approve of projects so that when they approve of projects, they must ensure that they have gone through rigorous cost benefit analysis. Open reporting and disclosure of loan agreements are needed to prevent accumulating hidden liabilities. Strong debt management frameworks and medium-term fiscal plans can help countries maintain macroeconomic stability and enjoy the benefits of foreign infrastructure investments. Sustainability will mitigate the risk of external funds being used to aid the country at the expense of financial stability. (Ravenhill 2017)

3.1.4 Energy security and infrastructure investments

A key aspect of the growing Chinese involvement in the Middle East is energy security and infrastructure investments which are largely motivated by the growing Chinese energy demand on the one hand and the strategic ambition on the other hand of the Chinese to secure stable long-term supplies. The Middle East plays an outstanding role within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative owing to its large reserves of oil and natural gas and its geographical location along some of the major global maritime and overland trading routes.

China has been making more and more investments to the energy related infrastructure in the region, such as oil refineries petrochemical complexes power plants, renewable energy projects and port facilities that help to transport and log energy in the region. These investments are not only aimed at ensuring uninterrupted flow of the imported energy to sustain the industrial development in China but also to enhance further economic interdependence with the key states in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia the United Arab Emirates and Iran. Simultaneously such projects help to modernize energy infrastructure in the countries of host increasing production capacity and regional connectivity. Nonetheless the increased presence of China in the energy infrastructure of the region is also indicative of greater geopolitical concerns in that it enhances the influence of China in a strategically important region as well as diversifying its global energy routes out of potential chokepoints. In such a manner the energy security policy of China in the Middle East is the combination of the economic need infrastructure diplomacy and the long run geopolitical positioning Dunning (1993)

3.2.1 Energy Import Dependence and Security Strategy

The high rates of industrialization and economic growth have greatly raised the reliance of China on imported energy especially oil and natural gas. The Middle East is still among the most problematic suppliers because of the large reserves of hydrocarbons as well as the cheap cost of exporting oil and gas. This dependence makes energy security a core pillar of Chinese foreign policy and economic planning because any disruption in supply routes e.g. by maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz or by geopolitical tensions in producer states can directly impact the stability of domestic industries. Through this energy security has been firmly embedded into the broader development strategy of China under the Belt and Road Initiative which focuses on ensuring the diversification and resilience of energy supply chains in China through long term cooperation with resource rich areas (International Energy Agency, 2019).

In order to control this dependence China has developed a complex approach to energy security which includes an investment in foreign oil and gas infrastructure the development of diplomatic relations with major oil and gas producers in the Middle East and diversification of transportation routes through pipelines and maritime routes. The International Energy Agency states that China has turned into one of the largest global importers of Middle Eastern oil further supporting the strategic value of the region in its power system. This can not only stabilize the inflows of energy but also make it less vulnerable to the volatility of the global market and the political upheavals which makes energy security a prime driver of the Chinese infrastructure diplomacy. (Yergin, 2011)

3.2.2 Infrastructure Development in Energy Sectors

To achieve long term and stable energy supplies China has considerably extended its investment in energy related infrastructure in the Middle East as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. These investments are in the form of development of oil refineries petrochemical complexes pipeline deep water ports and large-scale storage terminals. Not only can such infrastructure guarantee efficient transportation and processing of crude oil and natural gas it is also a way to enhance the overall reliability of the energy supply chains between producing and consuming regions. China facilitates a closer integration of the Middle Eastern energy exporters into the world market and thereby reduces transportation costs and enhances trade efficiency (Bohi, T. & Toman, M. 1996).

Moreover, such infrastructure projects help to modernize energy systems in host countries at the same time strengthening the position of China in the global energy networks. The International Energy Agency believes that infrastructure investment is one of the most important elements in ensuring energy trade stability and increasing cross border energy cooperation. With these developments China is able to protect its own energy imports as well as promote even deeper economic interdependence with the Middle Eastern states thereby enhancing its long term strategic and commercial presence in the region (Chester 2010).

3.2.3 Geopolitical Influence and Strategic Positioning

The investments in the Middle East energy infrastructure by China are not only economically valuable but also contribute to the enhancement of its geopolitical influence in the strategically important region. By establishing energy corridors ports and integrated trade networks with the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative China not only improves its access to key energy routes but also increases its involvement in the global energy governance.

The investments will enable China to forge long term relationships with major energy producing states and entrench itself more within regional supply chains and logistics. Meanwhile this approach assists China to diversify its energy importation routes and to avoid relying on vulnerable maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of

Hormuz. The International Energy Agency has indicated that the establishment of diversified supply routes should be considered as one of the important elements of the contemporary energy security strategies particularly of the major economies which depend on imports. By reinforcing the infrastructure connections in the Middle East not only is the stability of the energy imports of China enhanced but also the strategic leverage that China has in the region which remains central to the global energy flows and the great power competition.

3.2.4 Long term Partnerships and Economic Integration

The long-term partnerships and economic consolidation that the Chinese government has pursued as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative driven by the desire to obtain energy resources and expand China's economic interests especially have reached the Middle East. Chinese energy partners have constructed advanced multi sector partnerships that contain the elements of conventional energy trading. In the case of oil and gas Chinese partners have constructed systems of trade and interrelated economic systems through the incorporation of infrastructure logistics and financial investment. For example, major Chinese energy companies have engaged with the Gulf's national oil companies to develop refineries petrochemical complexes and create new industrial zones thereby fostering increasing economic interdependence.

These long-term partnerships boost diplomatic stability by making China's development strategy congruent to economic transformation strategies of Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 as well as the diversification initiatives of the Gulf countries. Because of this congruence further trust is developed and new investment flows are contributed to joint ventures in emerging industries such as renewable energy and hydrogen and digital infrastructure along with traditional sectors. According to China Gulf relations studies this expansion of partnerships is purposely indicative of diversifying economic activities and systematic inclusion in economic relations and forms of industrial integration in particular institutionalized economic integration where the energy trade is laced with wider strategic partnerships rather than ad hoc or isolated transactions. In general, these long-term partnerships will ensure China reliable access to energy and at the same time increase China's economic and strategic interests in the Middle East.

3.3 Growing Political and Technological Influence

The rising political power of China in the international system is strongly associated with its increasing economic diplomacy and infrastructure-based engagement according to the Belt and Road Initiative. China has made its voice heard in Asia, Africa as well as the Middle East without necessarily having to depend on military alliances which is why China has been able to use large scale development financing bilateral trade agreements and strategic partnerships to bolster its diplomatic presence across Asia, Africa as well as the Middle East. This strategy enables China to establish long term political relations through offering infrastructure development loans and investment opportunities that resonate with the development priorities of partner countries. This has seen many states interact with china not just as an economically but also as a significant diplomatic player in the regional and international scene. This increasing political role is further enhanced by the fact that China is actively involved in the activities of multilateral institutions and is also busy trying to influence the world governance discourses on trade, development, and connectivity (Nye 2011).

While expanding its smart cities telecommunications, AI, and digital infrastructure China's technology is becoming dominant. As they expand their 5G network, digital surveillance, e commerce and fintech into developing countries China's technology is becoming embedded in many member developing countries systems. The International Telecommunication Union said

that technological advancement is affecting the new order of the world's economy. For developing countries China is modernizing its digital infrastructure. For China its a way to influence what emerging markets adopt politically and economically. It gives China strong political and technological clout to advance its ambitions of creating new global standards that further its interests and expand its influence (Castells 2010).

3.4 Soft Power and Security Cooperation Initiatives

The emergence of China as a global power does not just come through an increase in the economic base but also through the strategic application of soft power and security cooperation programs especially under the rubric of the Belt and Road Initiative. Soft power is defined as the capacity of a country to influence other people using culture, diplomacy, education and values instead of force. In this respect China has greatly developed Chinese cultural diplomacy in terms of Confucius Institutes, educational scholarships, media outreach, and people to people exchanges which also help to enhance the Chinese image in the world and to strengthen the bilateral relations. They are sometimes accompanied by economic engagement, which enables China to gain goodwill in developing countries and also strengthen long term political and economic relationships.

Consequently, soft power has grown to be a significant complement to infrastructure-based diplomacy of China as it helps it to shape its perceptions and enhance its influence without necessarily having to engage in direct military confrontation.

Aside from soft power China has become more active in security cooperation initiatives. This is particularly pronounced in the realm of counter terrorism, maritime security and peacekeeping. In terms of peacekeeping China has been active in United Nations peacekeeping operations as well as increasing naval cooperation to secure his primary trade routes especially those relating to Middle East energy imports. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has argued that China's increasing involvement in peacekeeping is driven by a combination of protecting China's increasing foreign investments and a desire to promote a stable environment along key trade routes. With this mix of soft power and limited security cooperation China's global image is more balanced combining economic diplomacy with security cooperation while not breaking with the principle of non intervention in internal affairs (Bremmer 2010).

Chapter 4

Emerging Dynamics of Competition and the New Order Narrative

The emerging competitive relations between the major players in global affairs the United States and China have begun to shape the world's discourse generally and the strategically important regions the Middle East, specifically. Rather than being characterized by direct military confrontation this competition is being defined by the contest for economic dominance technological superiority, energy diplomacy and infrastructure investment. In this context the United States and China have similarly but differently focused their strategies on the Middle East. While the United States resorts to military presence and security alliances, China is expanding her influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and economic statecraft. This competitive relationship is posing serious concerns about whether the Middle East is evolving into a new theatre of competing geopolitics, where energy resources, trade routes and infrastructure are used more as instruments of strategic competition as opposed to concerns of economic growth. (Fukuyama 2014)

In the new order of international politics Middle Eastern states are using balancing hedging and selective alignment strategies to construct a competitive environment moving outward from being passive players. States actively pursue a diverse foreign policy (that includes both

Washington and Beijing) so as to maximize economic interests and maintain strategic self determination. This results in an intricate pattern of convergence divergence of U.S and Chinese policies especially in the fields of energy, security, and technology. The new order is contrary to the original Cold War order which was characterized by a low level of interdependence and strict ideological polarization. The new order features a high level of economic interdependence and pragmatic alliances. Because of this the Middle East is being perceived more and more as a contentious region yet a highly interlinked one where alliances are being redefined energy politics are being played and inter and intra regional infrastructure investments are being focused in order to morph the regional security frameworks and long-term geopolitical stability.

4.1 Comparative Study of U.S. A and Chinese strategies in the Middle East

The US and China are pursuing two different but extremely influential policies in the Middle East. Military and economic interests and overall geopolitics drive them both. Trade and investment and military presence are the main variables of US influence in the Middle East. The US has military bases and allied states in the Middle East since the 20th century. US allies in the region are Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states along with Israel. US interests are having stable allies and trade routes in the region and having the energy trade continue.

China's trade and infrastructure investments and long-term energy relations are part of the Belt and Road Initiative. China influences with joint ventures and loans. The main concern of China and the US are the trade routes. Finally economic relationships and high levels of infrastructure projects further China's and the Middle East's economic relationship. The two states policies are different because China's policies are focused on non interference and US policies are focused on military presence and control. Chinas and the US policies allow the Middle East to have integrated economies with military presence (The State Council of the PRC, 2014). The US and China have different yet very powerful strategies in the Middle East based on their security economic and geopolitical interests. The two powers have been having a major dissimilarity on the manner in which they exercise power over the region as both powers are aware of the strategic importance of the region due to its rich energy reserves and the control it has over major world trade routes.

The US is pursuing a security-oriented strategy that is based on military alliances defense cooperation accords and long-term partnership with key players in the region including Saudi Arabia, Israel and Gulf states, with the aim of ensuring regional stability and securing the maritime chokepoints. Contrarily China implements an economic and development-oriented policy within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative based on an infrastructure investment, trade expansion and energy cooperation strategy instead of a military deployment strategy. This is a wider opposition between U. S hard power dominance and the Chinese focus on economic diplomacy and non interference in domestic matters (Ding, 2013). In terms of strategy the U.S has a greater reliance on the use of hard power. Hard power instruments in this case consist of military bases a naval presence and security guarantees to control vital sea lanes e.g the Strait of Hormuz. With this military presence historically the U.S has the ability to dominate the architecture of security in the region and the ability to respond to a crisis in a timely manner. China has less reliance on military power. China pursues economic integration through trade, lending and investment in large infrastructure projects. Internationally China has a nonmilitary presence focused on stability developing its influence through ports, industrial zones and energy infrastructure as opposed to military intervention. Despite their different approaches the U.S and China are both concerned with energy security in the Middle East as an important region of oil and gas. The U.S is interested in keeping the supply corridors

open and market stability while China is concerned with an infrastructure and a network of security and order producer countries in the region.

In general, while both the U.S and China have similar approaches to the enhancement of the influence and energy security in the Middle East the methods to achieve the same objectives are different namely the U.S relies on military alliances while China relies on the use of economic and infrastructural diplomacy. Even if this is the case some of their methods converge especially their interdependence on regional energy resources and concern about the stability in the region. The International Energy Agency states that the two countries depend on energy export from the Middle East and as a result energy remains a crucial component in the foreign relations of both countries. However, even if this shared dependency exists the divergence of strategies creates a dual layer regional system in which U.S security continues to dominate the region while China's economic influence rises thereby reflecting the global power relations. (Richard, 2016)

4.2 Convergence and Divergence between Both Powers

There is an intricate combination of cooperation and confrontation in the United States and China engagement with the Middle East with overlapping interests and clear strategic differences. One of the main points of intersection is that both powers have a crucial interest in the stability of the Middle East due to their common dependence on the energy resources of the region in particular oil and natural gas. Both also put an emphasis on the security of international maritime trade routes including some of the most important chokepoints to international energy markets and supply chains such as the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, the two countries are interested in preserving and increasing their influence in the region due to its importance as a strategic hub linking Asia, Europe and Africa and defining global patterns in the trade sphere. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in their strategic instruments and methods. The US mostly utilizes a security-based approach based on military alliances defense cooperation and longstanding regional deployments which reflects its long-standing practice of being a security provider in the Middle East.

In its turn China is guided by the development oriented and economic approach of diplomacy in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative which prioritizes infrastructure development, trade relations and energy cooperation and does not intervene in the domestic affairs. The U.S focuses on hard power and direct military involvement whereas China expands its influence through economic interdependence, financial investment and long-term development projects and creates a dual but uneven system of influence in the region. (Wang, 2018)

4.3 Balancing, Hedging and Alignment Behaviors in Middle Eastern States

Middle Eastern states are trying to find the best way to deal with intensifying US China competition with respect to balancing, hedging and selective alignment. Most states are not trying to pick sides. Instead, they are using practices that enable them to derive the most benefits with the least amount of security risks. An observable example of this is the balancing of interests with the United States in the defense and military assistance cooperation and the extension of trade and the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure with China. They are remaining strategically independent and avoiding reliance on one actor in a competitive system (Gause, 2010). The Gulf States often hedge their partnerships by employing these techniques. The purposeful partnerships involve the balancing of competing powers. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates invest especially heavily in economic relations with China while balancing their economic interests against the military guarantees of the United States. In the Middle East alignments that reflect a commitment to one particular power for a specific strategic need such as crisis security or economic redistribution happen considerably less frequently.

These examples demonstrate the Middle Eastern country's active role in constructing the balance of power within the region using flexible diplomacy to achieve both US security and Chinese economic interests. (David, 1991)

As the United States and China vie for supremacy throughout the Middle East Saudi Arabia is attempting to hedge its interests. During the Cold War and beyond the Kingdom was reliant on American military, political and protective support. Now the relative U.S. retreat from the region coupled with the expansion of the Chinese economy has encouraged a more actively diversified foreign policy on the part of Saudi Arabia. China is expected to play a large role in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and plans for greater trade and investment as well as strengthened collaboration in the fields of infrastructure, energy and technology. At the same time Saudi Arabia intends to maintain a strong security relationship with the United States. While the U.S arms and assists the Saudi military and Saudi Arabia provides the United States with security cooperation Saudi Arabia has placed China in the top rank of its trading partners, and the U.S is the leading importer of Saudi oil. This two-pronged approach is intended to grant Saudi Arabia a greater degree of strategic independence and avoid reliance on a single major power in a multipolar world (Kuik, 2008).

The UAE is situated quite strategically between Washington and Beijing in the scope of a multidimensional and pragmatic foreign policy. The UAE has very close security relationships with the US in the Gulf and has developed very extensive economic and technology relations with China concerning infrastructure, telecommunications, AI, energy etc. Cooperation with both is essential to Abu Dhabi's economic modernization and ambition to become the regional power. Beijing and Tehran have strengthened their strategic relations due to their mutual opposition to the US and the sanctions. China has long term energy relations with Iran and considerable investment in infrastructure which gives Iran economic and political advantages and China more secure energy and regional influence. The dilemma for Israel is to try to keep its close relations with the US and at the same time economically relate to China. The US has expressed concern to Israel over the sensitive technology and strategic assets at stake in Chinese investment in Israeli infrastructure and technology. To solve the dilemma Israel has to balance the vital and inseparable security relations with the US and the benefits of China's growing economy in the area. Cases like these exemplify the flexible and multialigned policies of the Middle Eastern countries in the context of the increasing rivalry of the US and China (Womack, 2016).

CASE STUDIES

Saudi Arabia's Balancing Strategy

Saudi Arabia is adopting a "hedging" approach by continuing its long-standing security alliance with the United States and strengthening the economic and technological ties with China. While Riyadh is still dependent on Washington for defense and military protection it is growingly turning to Beijing for its trade, energy export, infrastructure and Vision 2030 development objectives. Mediation in the Saudi Iran rapprochement of 2023 was another sign of Tehran's push to diversify its strategic partnerships and lessen reliance on the United States (He und Feng, 2012).

The Washington Beijing Relations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE has a flexible foreign policy aiming to gain the most for the United States and China. Abu Dhabi is more than just a close security and defense partner of Washington but has also pursued a growing economic relationship with Beijing through investments in technology, ports, telecom and infrastructure projects tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. The two-track

strategy is part of UAE's wider strategic diversification and regional influence in a multipolar world order (Kahler, 2013).

Iran China Strategic Alignment

Iran and China have also forged deep ties through energy deals, trade and extensive long term strategic alliances meant to help them toe the line against Western pressure and U.S sanctions. Beijing sees Iran as an important geopolitical and energy partner within its Belt and Road Initiative while Tehran sees China as a key economic and diplomatic lifeline. Their common agenda is to oppose U.S hegemony and advocate a more multipolar world order though China is still trying to manage relations with competing Gulf countries (Roy, 1994).

Israel's Strategic Dilemma

The situation in Israel pinpoints the challenge of balancing a close partnership with the United States and increasing deeper economic and technological relations with China. Because of security concerns, the U.S has been advising Israel to keep the Chinese out of critical areas such as ports infrastructure and high technology. Concurrently China has been growing in the international and regional marketplace and therefore a complete economic disengagement is difficult for Israel. The situation is a balancing act and most likely reflects the U.S China rivalry for the strategic balancing of clients in the Middle East Sch tells. (2000)

4.4 Characteristics of the original Cold War vs current dynamics

The old Cold War was mainly typified with a rigid bipolar system where the world politics was divided into two opposite ideological blocs capitalism vs communism. It was a time of limited economic interdependence among the rival blocs strong military alliances like the NATO and the Warsaw Pact and frequent proxy wars in the developing regions where both the super powers were competing with each other indirectly. The competition was more or less a zero-sum game that is as one party gains the other is seen to be losing and the world is relatively fixed as one side is ideologically loyal and the other is bound by security commitments. Contrary to this the present geopolitical landscape between the United States and China is much more complicated and intertwined economically especially in such a region as the Middle East. (Lake, 2009)

Unlike in the previous Cold War the present situation lacks firm ideological oppositions. Instead of strong ideological splits today's situation is shaped by intense globalization economic interdependence and multipolar competition. US China rivalry is characterized by stronger economic competition, technology, energy and infrastructure than military confrontation. The US is relying on its military alliances and security partnerships while China is exercising its influence through trade and investment especially in the Belt and Road Initiative. However the current situation allows some degree of cooperation competition, or a combination of both which is unlike the alliances of the previous Cold War. Compared to the strongest ideological and military splits of the previous Cold War the current situation is more fluid and dominated by economics than ideology.

4.5 Is the Middle East a New Geopolitical Frontline

There is room to argue the Middle East has become a new Cold War front for the United States and China however it is difficult to deny the Middle East is rapidly developing as an arena for geopolitical competition between the United States and China. The Middle East has a unique combination of strategic elements with its vast energy reserves and control of key maritime chokepoints located along a pathway between the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. The United States is able to maintain a strong influence in this region because of long standing military alliances, defense cooperation and an ongoing military presence. China on the other hand has been able to expand its influence in the region through economic engagement and

the development of partnerships for infrastructure and energy in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The overlapping of these strategies in the region has fundamentally impacted the global state of geopolitics. However, unlike the bipolar hard bopped confrontations prevalent during the Cold War the contemporary Middle East lacks the rigid block divisions. Instead, the region is characterized by fluidity interdependence and multi alignment. While balancing and hedging policies are prevalent in the region many states maintain security cooperation with the United States while cultivating solid economic and technological ties with China. This results in a more complex differentiated and competitive environment in which influence is negotiated and evenly distributed as opposed to a monopolized sphere of influence. As a result, the idea of a definite frontline is less clear as regional states do not have to align to a strict ideological camp instead, they prefer to establish relations with one another that are flexible based on their national and economic interests. (Paul, 2005)

Therefore, although the Middle East starts to show the signs of great power competition by the end of the Cold War it is unlikely to be termed as a classic geopolitical frontline. Rather it represents a strategic space that is a hybrid of competition and collaboration. The US is in a dominant position in the security set ups while China is improving the region's economy and infrastructure. The combination of the two is creating a dynamic order in the Middle East where power is distributed in a number of spheres of influence as opposed to power being concentrated in a single rivalry. Thus, it is a contested but interconnected region.

4.6. Regional Alliance, Security Architecture and Energy Politics

The changing rivalry between the United States and China in the Middle East has dramatic consequences on the regional alliances, security models and energy policies. Middle Eastern states are also shifting towards being less committed and exclusive to any single partnership in favor of a more flexible multi alignment approach. Traditional security relations with the United States are still significant especially in the area of defence cooperation and military protection but are now accompanied by increasing economic and infrastructural relations with China under the Belt and Road Initiative. The change is transforming regional politics with states focused on strategic independence and diversified relationships instead of relying on one external force. (Buzan und Wæver, 2003)

As far as security architecture is concerned the region is not only shifting to a more complex and layered order of security but is also moving towards a less U.S centered security order. Though the United States is still playing a dominant role in the military presence arm supply and limited security cooperation the growing role played by China in diplomatic mediation and limited security cooperation brings new dimensions to the stability in the region. This is not to take the place of existing security structures but rather provide an economic and diplomatic overlay that exists with the traditional military structures. Consequently, the regional security is becoming more multipolar and fragmented with overlapping spheres of influence as opposed to having a single guarantor which is dominant. (Gause, 2010) Competition among the key powers in the energy politics is redefining energy flows and patterns of investment all over the world. This has made the middle east a strategic interest of the United States as well as China since it continues to be the center of global oil and gas supply. As the United States focuses on market stability and securing of energy routes in the sea China focuses on long term stability of supply through infrastructure investments refinery projects and bilateral energy agreements. This twofold interaction enhances the strategic importance of those energy producing states and they have more bargaining power in international negotiations.

Chapter 05

The Rise of Developmental Peace Shaping a New Consensus for Regional Autocracies

The development of developmental peace marks a shift in international relations. In this view economic growth development of infrastructure and stability of states take precedence over political liberalization and democracy. Developmental peace is also gaining traction among regional dictatorships looking for alternative modernization strategies. In contrast to Western democratic models which emphasize the interdependence of peace, stability and democracy developmental peace is grounded in economic stability and gradual reform.

Developmental peace also draws on the idea that sustained economic growth and the reduction of poverty can promote social order and political legitimacy without having to adopt liberal democracy. In addition, this framework has characterized the policy preferences of many Middle Eastern, Asian and African countries where governments have started to adopt growth centered governance instead of focusing on the reform of the political system. (Fawcett, 2013)

The key principles of this developing consensus include the doctrine of non intervention in domestic affairs the advancement of state led capitalism as a form of viable development and the use of infrastructure as both a form of economic propulsion and as a means of social control and political legitimacy. This policy also portrays a larger shift towards a more transactional global order whereby states will engage in pragmatic interest-based cooperation as opposed to subscribing to universally applicable ideological norms.

Here the classical traditional Western liberalism of the traditional universalism in the context of democracy human rights, governance standards and so on is increasingly being questioned by the alternative models that put more emphasis upon the sovereignty the stability and the long-term developmental needs. The strategic patience further supports this shift as governments that practice developmental peace focus on gradual state-managed progress instead of fast-tracked political change thus redefining the relationship between development governance and international cooperation in the modern international system. (Valbjørn und Bank, 2012)

5.1 The Primacy of Economic Stability over Political Reform

The political reform is gradually giving way to the increasing policy orientation where governments are increasingly putting economic development, social order and state stability above the rapid political liberalization. This strategy is especially noticeable in developing and authoritarian situations when economic growth is regarded as a condition of sustaining legitimacy and avoiding instability.

Partially influenced by the model related to China and its development-oriented engagement within the frames of the Belt and Road Initiative this viewpoint stresses that the development of strong economic foundations should precede or even replace political reform. Consequently, the tendency of many states to follow the governance strategies based on performance and outcomes of development and gradual change instead of the immediate democratic transformation has become more common. (Hinnebusch, 2003)

5.1.1 The Doctrine the Economic Growth as the basis of Stability

Among developing and dictatorial societies long term economic growth is generally viewed as the key pillar of social stability and long-term national development. Governments have been focusing on policies that can stimulate economic growth this is in terms of creation of jobs development of large-scale infrastructures industrialization and reduction of poverty to improve the living standards and to keep them in power. The key assumption behind this approach is that increasing incomes increased access to services and visible development outcomes can alleviate social discontent and minimize the chances of political unrest. Within this paradigm, economic performance is a major source of state legitimacy and in many cases,

it replaces the democratic accountability. Models related to China especially within the framework of such initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative support this point of view by showing how the rapid process of economic transformation and infrastructure led economic growth can lead to political stability without necessarily resulting in political liberalizations of non-interference. (Lynch, 2016)

5.1.2 Late or slow Political Liberalization

The process of political liberalization being delayed or gradual is an indicative of a governance system whereby states deliberately delay or phase a process of political liberalization in order to avoid instability and institutional breakdown. Governments that subscribe to this model contend that with very rapid democratization, especially in situations of weak institutions economic fragility or social fragmentation, political turmoil, governance paralysis or even state failure may ensue. They rather stress the necessity to establish, prior to the introduction of extensive political participation and competitive electoral systems, solid administrative capacity, legal frameworks and economic resilience. In this school of thought, political reform has been approached as a slow and moderated process as opposed to a direct goal. (Ulrichsen, 2014)

It is a strategy that is commonly supported by development models that are associated with China where both economic growth and also an institutional strengthening have been antecedents to an extensive political liberalization. Advocates believe that such sequencing reforms would ensure social order and would establish the necessary circumstances to ensure sustainable governance in the long run. Critics though argue that just the long delays in political reform can entrench authoritarian governance and constrain accountability. However, in most of the developing world, this model still dominates policy choices with stability state capacity and economic performance being prioritized over rapid democratization. (Barnett, 1998)

5.1.3 Performance Based Governance Legitimacy

Performance based governance and legitimacy is a model whereby governments gain their legitimacy through their capacity to provide tangible economic and social results. In this model state legitimacy is directly associated with such indicators as a sustained economic growth increased living standards adequate delivery of public services and visible development of infrastructure. When the citizens are able to experience an increment in employment rates, income, healthcare and education even without any formal political involvement the citizens are more likely to accept and support governance systems. This changes the foundations of legitimacy to be based on performance in terms of outcomes rather than based on procedural mechanisms (such as elections).

This model is commonly related to the governance practices observed in China whereby the rapid economic change and poverty reduction have been used to strengthen the political stability and public confidence. Governments can reinforce social contracts based on economic delivery as opposed to the political representation basis. However, although performance-based legitimacy can be good at ensuring short to medium term stability critics point out that it may be ineffective during the times of economic slowdown when deteriorating performance can undermine the trust of the population and reveal the lack of institutional mechanisms of accountability. (David, 1991)

5.1.4 Stability Oriented Models External Support

Outside assistance plays a key role in strengthening governance models focusing on economic stability as opposed to political stabilization in authoritarian contexts and in developing countries. Compared with classical Western donors who tend to have democracy human rights and institutional reform at the top of their agendas partners like China provide financial

assurances trade and less politicized infrastructure development. Governments are given funding for large scale projects like transportation networks energy systems and industrial zones without the demand for liberalization of the political system. As a result, governments can focus on stabilizing the economy strengthening state capacity and extending the stability of the regime while retaining their control over the political processes. (Schweller, 2004.)

This form of externalization not only enhances the performance of the economy but also justifies stability-oriented models of governance by showing that development could be made in the environment that is not based on Western liberalism. It offers regimes other sources of funds and diplomatic aid and diminishes dependence on institutions that foster governance reforms. Nevertheless, essential issues of sustainability of debt transparency and accountability in the long term are also raised because the lack of political conditions may limit the incentives to institutional reform. However, the contribution of external support of non-Western actors remains significant to the development of the developmental pathways that focus on the sovereignty economic performance and gradual change as opposed to immediate political transformation. (Lake, 2009)

5.1 State Led Capitalism as a Success Template

State led capitalism is an economic model where government is the central focus of the economy by directing economic growth through strategic planning, ownership of strategic industries and close coordination between state institutions and market actors. This is as compared to liberal market economies where emphasis is put on minimal government intervention to distribute resources encourage industrialization and spur long term development objectives. The example of China especially through its rapid economic transformation and globalization under the auspices of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative have made state led capitalism an influential alternative model of development to many developing and emerging economies. (Paul, 2005)

The model demonstrates how developed state institutions and infrastructure led development can lead to rapid economic modernization and poverty reduction. It is for this reason the model is being viewed as a success template more often. State led capitalism is likely to challenge the dominance of Western neoliberal economic models. It is likely to give example to how state power is one of the key driving forces of economic success and structural change. State led capitalism is likely to take on a specific form with a more active state role in certain sectors of the economy. It is likely to encourage the development of a certain public good by leveraging a public private partnership in order to achieve constant growth and stability. It is reasonable to conclude that the model is more often perceived as a success template. The integration of developed state institutions and planning are likely to lead certain countries on a sustained path of rapid economic modernization. It is for this reason that state led capitalism is more often portrayed in this light. It is for this reason that version of capitalism more often takes a more active role in integrated structures. (Walt (1987)

5.2 Infrastructure as a means of Social Control and Legitimacy

Development of infrastructure can have a dual purpose in the development and authoritarian nature of many political systems in developing countries as it not only drives economic growth but also serves as a tool of social control and political legitimacy. Governments tend to use large scale infrastructure projects including highways, ports, energy grids, smart cities and industrial zones as a means of demonstrating visible development outcomes, reinforcing state presence across territories, and reinforcing perceptions of good governance among the populace. In this regard infrastructure is becoming an important tool of establishing legitimacy as people are more likely to connect physical development and better services to effective

leadership and national development. This strategy is especially practiced in state-based models of development that are linked to China and its approach of reaching the global infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative. (Buzan und Wæver 2003)

In addition to legitimacy infrastructure means a lot to the social control as it increases state capacity to monitor, regulate and integrate population. In some cases, good governance and surveillance functions are more efficient with the help of digital infrastructure since the administrative reach has been enhanced through transportation networks. Urban redevelopment projects have transformed the distribution of populations and in some cases the capabilities of good governance and surveillance are more effective with the assistance of digital infrastructure. Similarly, by enhancing access to employment services and other economic opportunities infrastructure investment can help in reducing social unrest by addressing some of the main causes of public dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, opponents claim that infrastructure led governance would lead to stability and visibility of developments but would also cause centralization of power and lack of political pluralism in case of absence of institutional accountability. Infrastructure is therefore a development instrument as well as a political instrument that is used in shaping the relationships between the state and society. (Gause 2010)

5.3 Change to a Transactional Global Order

The modern global system is progressively becoming more transactional in their international order which is characterized by the relations between states, which are not defined by ideology, alliances, and shared values but rather by pragmatic exchanges of economic, political and strategic interest. In this changing order cooperation is more issue based and interest based with the states engaging in flexible partnerships that focus on immediate benefits like investment, trade access, energy security and technological cooperation.

This change may be especially noticed in the increasing involvement of China in global infrastructure and development financing, in particular, the Belt and Road Initiative, which focuses on bilateral deals, infrastructure investment and long-term economic partnerships without rigid ideological orientation. (Yergin (2011)

Meanwhile more laissez faire and interest-based forms of involvement are increasingly challenging more traditional Western led normative models that are based on a promotion of democracy liberal governance and institutional conditionality. Consequently, states especially in the Global South are increasing the number of partners that they engage with by balancing security relations with economic collaboration across rival powers. This shift is indicative of a larger reorganization of power in the world by being able to influence through contracts, investments and infrastructure as opposed to influencing through ideological leadership or military alliances. The world is therefore becoming more fragmented, multipolar and transactional and ushers in a new way of how states interact and how international cooperation is defined. (Fawcett (2013)

5.4 The problematizing of the Western Norms as being Universal

The notion of Western normative universalism in particular the idea that liberal democracy, free markets and human rights are global standards is becoming more and more challenged in the modern international relations. Most of the developing and emerging states contend that the political and economic systems must be based on the local historical cultural and developmental conditions instead of following one single western model. This criticism has become more pronounced with the emergence of alternative developmental models championed by China particularly through such initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative which puts forward the principles of state sovereignty non interference and development first

governance. These strategies offer a different story where economic growth and stability are valued more than the political liberalization, thus breaking the assumption that Western institutional models can be universally applied. (Hinnebusch 2003)

Such a change is also evident in the broader academic and policy discussions that point to the shortcomings of one size fits all prescriptions of development. According to reports by international bodies the results of governance and development are highly diverse across regions and that the application of uniform political principles cannot always lead to stability and economic growth. Indicatively both the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme have highlighted context specific development strategies that consider the institutional diversity and local conditions. This has led to a gradual contestation of normative authority with Western universalism being supplanted by a more pluralistic conceptualization of development, government and international relations and cooperation. (Lynch (2016)

5.6 LongTerm Sustainability Strategic Patience and Long-Term Stability

Strategic patience and long-term stability are a form of governance and foreign policy that emphasizes gradual development incremental change and sustained development over a rapid political or structural change. This viewpoint is especially applicable in most of the developing and authoritarian shading systems where the governments are trying to ensure continuity to prevent any sudden discontinuities and to develop institutional capacity over long time periods. Rather than the short-term political benefits or instant liberalization states pursuing this model place emphasis on the sustained economic growth expansion of infrastructures and social stability as the corner stones in ensuring a sustainable national development. In this regard long term planning is considered to be the necessary measure toward preventing the instability and ensuring that reforms should be implemented in a controlled and sustainable way. (Barnett 1998)

This model is highly linked with models of development advocated by China where long-term planning and gradual transformation have been the core of economic performance and government policy especially as seen under the umbrella of such campaigns as the Belt and Road Initiative. International engagement is another area in which strategic patience is shaping where alliances are formed over a span of decades through the investment in infrastructures integration of trade, and consistency of diplomacy and not rapid political adjustment. Consequently, this model strengthens the notion that the best way to achieve stability is through the sustained economic growth and gradual change management as opposed to the immediate and externally imposed political change. (Ulrichsen 2014)

Chapter 06

CONCLUSION and POLICY IMPLICATION

6.1 Findings

The conclusions about the U.S China strategic competition in the Middle East indicate that the area is now emerging as a key theatre for the formation of a new global order. The U.S prioritizes security agreements military bases and securing energy routes. Meanwhile to extend its influence, China relies more on foreign direct investments (FDI), trade connections and infrastructure projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This competition is different than the Cold War competition because it is not only competitive but cooperative meaning that states in the region now seek to balance their ties with both powers in order to maximize their strategic and economic advantages. As a result, the Middle East is becoming a multipolar region with China's emergence as a new player to threaten the traditional American influence and to shape a new complex and decentralized international system. (Schweller 2004)

6.2 Theoretical reflection on neo realism and great power competition

Great power competition is justifiable from the perspective of neo realism which argues that the anarchic international system gives rise to a struggle for survival security and power. The neo realist belief is that without a global authority the great powers are constantly combating each other to gain as much influence as possible and to make it difficult for any other power to take control. This theory is useful in understanding current geostrategic competition for example between the United States and China both aiming to achieve regional influence economic benefits and military dominance. In some parts of the world like the Middle East, Neo realism emphasizes the role of smaller states in balancing between different powers in order to serve their own national interests in a changing multipolar world.

6.3 Implication for Regional Stability and Global Powers Dynamics

The implications on regional stability show that despite the possibility of strategic competition between the United States and China in the next few years an open military confrontation in the Middle East is not very likely with the common interests in the energy security maritime stability and the continuity of economic flows. Each can pursue particular methods to maintain region wide stability given that economic interests are aligned with the condition of the world markets.

Such insights should shape policies in the direction of structured competition managing regional autonomy with greater emphasis on risk reduction especially with respect of inclusive cooperative approaches. Simultaneously by enabling the Middle Eastern states to engage in diversified and balanced foreign policy it is possible to further increase the stability of the region as well as maximize the chances of development investment and long-term economic change in an ever more multipolar international system.

6.4 Policy Recommendations for Middle Eastern and External Actors

The policymaking process in the Middle East countries must be balanced and pragmatic refraining from a reliance on any one Great Power and increasing cooperation with other Middle Eastern countries in the region economic diversification and strategic autonomy. Regional countries can promote maximum economic opportunities and minimize the risks of the becoming arenas for proxy rivalry by engaging both the United States and China through diplomacy trade and security partnership. To avoid destabilizing competition external actors especially the United States and China should take a more dialogic approach, as well as engage in conflict management and respecting regional sovereignty. Likely cooperation in areas like energy security infrastructure climate adaptation and counterterrorism can contribute to stability in the region and tensions stemming from great power competition in the new multipolar world order.

6.5 Direction for Further Research

Future studies of emerging powers in the Middle East and their effect on the balance of U.S and Chinese interests in a multipolar international system should be undertaken. The far-reaching consequences of economic diplomacy technology rivalry and energy transitions on great power competition in the region could also be examined in further research.

6.6 Conclusion

The current research discusses evolving U.S China strategic competition in the Middle East and assesses whether the competition represents a new variant of Cold War interaction for the region. Analyzing this through the lens of Neo Realist theory it was determined that the shifting global power dynamics particularly the increase in China's global influence and the relative resurgence of U.S global dominance made increasingly intense competition across the politics economics technology and security. The Middle East has become a focal point for U.S China

strategic competition. Both states have a vested interest in expanding their respective influence gaining access to regional states strategic energy resources and establishing long term relationships with regional states. The current state of U.S China competition has been further complicated by the growing Chinese presence in the Middle East especially given the Belt and Road Initiative.

Unlike the original Cold War that was characterized by a rigid bipolar world the contemporary competition is characterized by extensive globalization a high degree of economic interdependence and flexible global alignments. As such the current state of competition is a more complex fluid and multidimensional system that is devoid of the extreme ideological polarization of previous superpower competitions and is instead characterized by overlapping cooperation and competition.

The results indicate that the United States continues to rely on a security-based framework in the Middle East that utilizes extensive military alliances defense cooperation pacts strategic military deployments and regional deterrent systems. This framework demonstrates a long-term objective by Washington to guarantee the region's stability secure critical energy logistics and maintain the United States' strategic primacy in a geopolitically critical region. US presence in the region's security framework is so extensive that it dominates the frameworks for crisis management arms transfers, intelligence provision and the security of critical maritime chokepoints for example the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, the US policy is still largely driven by hard power instruments which China has largely avoided in favor of economic statecraft infrastructure diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative. Rather than resorting to military engagement China has focused on long term economic integration based on investments in the Middle East's transportation infrastructure and industrial zones strengthened energy and technology collaboration with regional states and non interference in the region's domestic affairs. The core elements of China's strategy are mutual economic gain gradually expanding relationships and respect for national sovereignty. It is through these elements that the region's economic development will be transformed. The country's long-term policy increasingly aims for China to become one of the foremost economic stakeholders in the Middle East. This policy is intended to be complementary to the country's security-based policies and is not meant to be immediately confrontational.

The study also discovered that states in the Middle East are not passive consumers of great power competition but active and increasingly autonomous strategic actors that play a decisive role in the determination of outcome in the region through balancing hedging and selective alignment strategies. Instead of being aligned to a single external power countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and the United Arab Emirates exhibit very practical and interest driven foreign policies that seek both to engage simultaneously with both Washington and China. This two-way involvement enables them to enjoy the maximum economic opportunities attract foreign investment and enjoy the benefits of infrastructure development through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative yet still have the necessary security guarantees traditionally offered by the United States. This trend of multi alignment indicates a dramatic change in regional politics and the end of narrow bloc politics and exclusive dependency on the Divine and Exclusive Model of regional politics. The foreign policy approaches of states in the region are becoming more aligned to strategic autonomy economic diversification and mitigation of risks in an era of growing great power rivalry.

Consequently, the actors in the Middle East are not merely reacting to the external pressures but actively influencing the competitive environment by balancing the interests of both powers and using them to their advantage. This dynamic behavior increases their bargaining power and

allows them to cope better with power competition at a global level contributing to a more complex multipolar and fluid regional order.

This paper drawing from a Neo Realist perspective posits that intense interstate power rivalry remains a defining element of contemporary international relations. However, rivalry of great powers in the Middle East dominated by Global supply chains economic interdependence and globalization is influenced by certain modern global structural limitations. Although Neo Realism emphasizes the chaos in the international system and the ever-present power and security rivalries of states the findings indicate that the rivalry between the U.S and China does not wholly resemble a classical zero-sum situation. Rather U.S China rivalry is contained by their mutual economic interests the global supply chains and the energy markets and will continue to be strategic but non belligerent. Therefore, the Middle East is dominated by a rivalry of global power interests but is in the main a region of indirect rather than direct conflict.

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