

GLOBAL MULTIPOLARITY AND THE INTERESTS OF MAJOR POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SYED FRAZ HUSSAIN NAQVI,* SYED QANDIL ABBAS,**
AND SYEDA HUDAISA KAZMI***

Abstract

As the international structure is moving towards global multipolarity, its implications are manifest in the Middle East as well. This paper attempts to explore the changing nature of the interaction between the Middle East and the international structure. It explains how the Middle East could become a central region in defining global multi-polarity as multiple actors have stakes in the region. While using the qualitative methodology, the paper attempts to comparatively discuss the policies of three major powers, i.e., China, Russia, and the US, in the Middle East. The paper examines the traditional patron-client relationship between the global powers and the regional states and elaborates on the transition in this relationship while outlining the reasons. The paper also attempts to answer the query of how the interests of global powers change vis-à-vis the transformation of the regional geopolitical structure of the Middle East.

Keywords: *multi-polarity, Middle East, great power competition, patron-client relationship, US-China competition*

* Mr Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi is a PhD scholar and currently the in-charge of Iran Program at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad.

** Dr Syed Qandil Abbas is an Assistant Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad.

*** Ms Syeda Hudaisa Kazmi is a PhD scholar at the SPIR, QAU, Islamabad.

Introduction

Since the collapse of the bipolar world structure in 1991, the US has enjoyed an unchallenged primacy on the global stage. The US assumed the role of a 'global policeman' by establishing its military presence across various regions like the Middle East, East Asia, and Eastern Europe while maintaining strong ties with its partners in western Europe and Oceania. Furthermore, as Russia became internally weak and China was reforming its economic system, it was expected that the dominance and hegemony of the US would prevail and the former two states would not only accept but actively participate in the US-led world order. However, parallel to the 'Pax-Americana' view, the alternative view challenged the sustainability of the unipolar world order. One such view was presented right after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Layne in 1993. He argued in his article that two factors would lead to the rise of a multipolar world which were the relative growth of the US power that would incite other states to balance against it and increase the economic burden on the US due to its security commitments.¹ With the advent of the 21st century, both these predictions came true. First, the unsuccessful military campaigns of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq coupled with its unchecked military growth prompted both Russia and China to echo their joint resentments against the US power and to call for a multipolar world. Since both Russia and China who were previously playing an active role in the bipolar world order, were left out of the US-led unipolar order, they formulated their 'strategic partnership', i.e., balancing, in 1996 to reflect their dissatisfaction with the US-led global system.² Second, the commitment to NATO and global security overburdened the US financial resources. The US not only contributes over 70 per cent of the NATO budget but it has also shared the maximum burden of the war cost in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere that is estimated to be \$8 trillion.³ The economic burden forced the US to minimise its engagement in the conflict-driven regions which left a

vacuum and provided other states the opportunity to substitute the US role.

While in economic terms, global multi-polarity is unfolding, the existence of only two states, i.e., Russia and China, which are actively challenging the US military dominance at the global level, is still noteworthy. Since 2012, Russia has been assertive in its foreign policy by cementing ties with the states of the Balkans, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa to thwart US dominance. In this regard, Russia has been utilising its vast energy resources and arms sales to these regions.⁴ On the other hand, since the inception of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has been engaging economically across the globe through strengthening trade, commercial, and investment ties. These investments have enabled China to grow its military might and contest the US's global dominance. China has already established its military base in Djibouti and has been conducting military exercises in the South China Sea.⁵ As both these states are challenging US primacy at the global level, one region stood out to be a common competing ground for the US, Russia, and China alike, i.e., the Middle East. Hence, in the wake of the shift in the world order, it is imperative to analyse the interests of these three states in the Middle East.

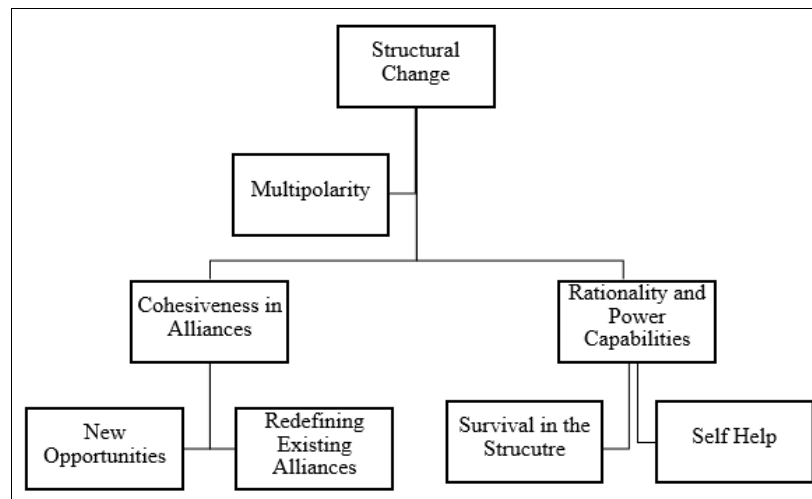
Theoretical Framework

Structural realism or neo-realism is the sub-theory of the realist school which deals with the international system. The pioneer of this theory was Kenneth Waltz who elaborated this concept in his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Structural realism puts forth the idea of 'survival' and 'self-help' in an 'anarchic' world order. It enables the understanding of systemic constraints on the actors, i.e., states, and helps in explaining the set patterns which every state follows. Hence, Waltz mentioned that the structure encourages the states to behave in a certain manner, i.e., rationality, and those who fail to comply with the structure get punished.⁶ There is no difference in the

functioning patterns of the states, however, the difference emerges due to their capabilities and their capacity to project themselves at the international level. Some states have lesser capabilities than others to perform the same task and thus those with greater capabilities are more efficient and powerful. The difference in capabilities of the states dictates their position in the international system in terms of hierarchy.⁷ While working in the system, the difference in the states' capabilities creates polarity. Since the theory was developed during the cold war, it favoured the bipolar structure as it was deemed more stable due to the concept of balance of power.⁸ Despite the failure of structural realism in explaining the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union, Waltz argued that US dominance in the shape of uni-polarity was temporary and soon the void created by the collapse of the Soviet Union would be filled.⁹ Thus, the major variables identifiable through the aforementioned discussion of structural realism are inter-related with each other while at the same time extending towards other variables. These variables are mentioned in the figure below.

Figure 1

Major Variables of Structural Realism



In the context of emerging multi-polarity vis-à-vis the changing regional dynamics of the Middle East, each state of the region is adamant to embark on a quest for more opportunities. Traditionally, the US has enjoyed primacy over Middle Eastern affairs by consolidating its partnership with different regional states mainly with the Gulf monarchies. Externally, the presence of US bases in these states and the Gulf waters deterred regional foes like Iran from plotting the expansion of its revolutionary ideology into these Gulf states. Internally, the patronage of a powerful global player allowed the royal houses of these states to rule over their territories with impunity and thwart any opposition to their rule. However, as the US policies in the region faced setbacks, i.e., the failure to bring peace in Iraq, the rise of non-state actors, and the expansion of Iranian power coupled with its reluctance to actively participate in the Syrian Crisis, the space for other global players to gain a foothold in the Middle East became inevitable. Hence, the structure which was dominated by the US was replaced by the participation of Russia and China, leading to multi-polarity.

The arrival of multiple global players presented them with the dilemma of choosing regional partners. For this, China was able to provide economic incentives to regional states that were struggling with their oil-dependent and stagnant economies. On the other hand, the entry of Russia provided strategic patronage for states already resisting the US-dominated structure of the region. These opportunities forced the players to redefine their existing alliances in the region. Due to the tilt of the US towards containing China, it disassociated itself from regional proceedings of the Middle East. This policy of the US resulted in the re-orientation of the interaction between the regional states as they moved towards reconciliation as a viable solution for their security. This is true in the case of the GCC-Qatar rapprochement, Saudi-Yemen ongoing peace talks, re-admission of Syria into the Arab League and most recently, the Iran-

Saudi rapprochement. Therefore, in this environment, it is imperative to understand the contemporary objectives of the external powers in the Middle East.

US Interests

The US has been the most consistent international actor in the Middle East. Historically, the motives of the US in the region can be classified into four periods: the early cold war (1945 – 1979), the second cold war (1979 – 1991), the post-cold war (1991 – 2003), and post-Saddam (2003 – 2011) periods. Paul Jabber outlined five main policy objectives of the US in the Middle East during the cold war, i.e., consistent flow of oil, containment of the Soviet Union, unshakeable commitment to Israel's security, maintaining friendly ties with the Arab states, and preventing the outbreak of a regional war.¹⁰ In following these objectives, the US fostered cordial relations with the Arab states (mainly the GCC countries, Jordan, and Egypt), Türkiye, and Iran to prevent the expansion of the Soviet Union. The US also continued to provide security aid to Israel which amounted to nearly \$30 billion from 1959 to 1991.¹¹ Lastly, to prevent the possibility of a regional war between the Arabs and Israel, the US initiated the peace process, famously known as the *Camp David Accords* in 1978 between Egypt and Israel. However, with the onset of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US faced a dilemma as the pro-US government of the Shah was overthrown. Resultantly, the US adopted a new policy called the *Carter Doctrine* that was based on two major aspects: assisting the regional friendly states to assert US influence and to secure vital energy resources of the Persian Gulf against external threats. Therefore, when Iraq launched an attack on Iran owing to the threat of Iranian expansionism, the US began providing military and political support to the Baathist regime. This allowed the US to counter both the Iranian threat as well as the Soviet expansion by bringing Iraq into its camp.

The US policy in the post-Cold War era reflected a continued rather growing support for Israel, clearly manifested through the

peace process between the Arabs and Israel in the form of the *Oslo Accords* in 1993 which apparently settled the Israel-Palestine conflict and enhanced Israel's security.¹² On the other hand, the US adopted two policies simultaneously to thwart regional threats: *dual containment* (against both Iran and Iraq after the First Gulf War) and *increased military footprint* from less than 1,000 troops to over half a million personnel in the aftermath of the Gulf War.¹³ The increase in the military force reflected the growing commitment of the US to Middle Eastern security by deterring potential enemies and reinstating its global hegemonic status.

However, the attempt at pre-eminence by the US aggravated certain groups to contest their presence in the Muslim World. The most notorious one of them was *Al-Qaeda* which intensified its attacks on the US assets in the region and across the globe.¹⁴ Following the 9/11 attacks, the major policy objective of the US was shifted to curbing terrorism and its state-sponsorship, mainly *Al-Qaeda* and its associates. Eventually, for the first time since WWII, US troops were deployed in the region for overt regime change in enemy states. Cognisant of the anti-Americanism, the US ensured that the threatening regime would be neutralised and the democratic wave would sweep across the region to eliminate fundamentalism. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 reflected both of these US ambitions. As the US invasion of Iraq proved to be a debacle in the following years, the US desire for democracy in the Middle East rejuvenated. The *Arab Spring* protests in 2011 which led to regime change in Egypt and Libya further accelerated the process. Hence, while summarising, the US policies since post-WWII till 2011 in the Middle East largely revolved around consolidating the US influence in the region in political, security, and economic domains, though economic interests became marginal as US dependence on Middle Eastern oil relegated. Hence, the contemporary US policies and objectives are as follows:

Security

Since the Arab Spring uprisings and the US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the Middle East witnessed a new wave of terrorism in the form of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Still, the Obama Administration was reluctant to partake in any military operation against ISIS, fearing the return of similar complexities that had prevailed during the previous military presence in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. According to Paul Williams, the US adopted the strategy of *strategic absence* which entailed three features: limiting the scope of US interests, leading from behind, and allowing the regional allies to take up the task of regional security.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in 2014, when the US had to deploy troops on the ground in Iraq, it strictly followed the joint combatant approach while partnering with the Iraqi military and the Kurdish militias. The US also followed the same strategy in Syria by arming the anti-Assad rebels via Arab allies in their fight against ISIS while not directly associating itself with the Syrian Civil War.¹⁶ Obama's policy of disengagement continued to exacerbate things during the tenure of his successor, former US president Donald Trump. Despite his criticism of Obama's policies, Donald Trump continued to withdraw US troops from Syria and the Persian Gulf.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he resorted to the concept of *offshore balancing* by enormously arming US allies in the region. During Trump's presidency, Israel received arms worth nearly \$500 million from 2016 to 2019 (over 90 per cent of Israel's global arms imports), Saudi Arabia received arms of nearly \$3 billion in 2017-19 (over 80 per cent of its total arms imports), and the UAE received an average of approximately \$600 million worth of arms (over 75 per cent of its global arms imports) from the US.¹⁸ Under the Biden administration, the Middle East strategy has seen a setback mainly due to the haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Ukraine War. Thus, while the US attention remained focused on Ukraine in the security domain, the Middle East remained a relatively silent arena for the US security objectives. However, the US tried to diplomatically

resolve the energy crisis in Europe by asking the GCC states, mainly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), to increase oil production. Nonetheless, such an attempt failed due to Biden's strong criticism of the KSA over the human rights issue.

Politics

The political interests of the US in the Middle East are more clearly defined and are persistent with a few exceptions. The foremost political interest of the US is to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict while ensuring the security of Israel. Despite having a strong defence system and maintaining a *qualitative military edge (QME)* over its neighbours, diplomatic isolation of Israel is a threat to its security.¹⁹ During Obama's period, the US facilitated two rounds of talks between Israel and Palestine in 2010 and 2013-14, however, both rounds were called off without any common agenda.²⁰ Despite facilitating the talks, the US continued to put its weight behind Israel by increasing the security aid as well as providing a diplomatic cover through the power of veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).²¹ Successively, during the tenure of former president Donald Trump, the US practically moved its embassy to Jerusalem as a symbol of recognising it as 'the undivided capital of Israel'.²² In contrast, Trump proposed \$50 billion in investments for Palestine and granted it 'limited sovereignty' under Israel's supervision.²³ The second major objective of the US is to ensure a perpetual Arab-Israel peace. The Abraham Accords which perpetuated the peace between Israel and the two Gulf states of the UAE and Bahrain, proved pivotal in ensuring the Arab-Israel rapprochement as Morocco and Sudan also established diplomatic relations with Israel.²⁴ The rapprochement between two major allies of the US (Israel and Arabs) can provide an opportunity to develop a regional security framework and decrease the security burden of the US. Both of these objectives of the US expanded in their scope during the Biden Administration. President Biden sought to actively resolve the Palestine issue, especially after the May 2021 conflict through

regional actors like Egypt while intensifying Israel's normalisation process. This was evident with the US insistence on Saudi-Israel negotiations which have so far yielded minimum results due to differences between President Biden and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman.²⁵ The third political objective of the US is to counter the Iranian threat in the region through political transitions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The policy during the Obama period was that of appeasement which was aimed at bringing Iran into the mainstream and revoking its revisionist policies by lifting the sanctions in exchange for suspension of the latter's nuclear activities. On the contrary, Trump's policy towards Iran went in the opposite direction by withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal and adopting the 'maximum pressure strategy' to cripple the Iranian economy. The US also went into a confrontation with Iran as reflected in the drone killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. After the ascendancy of President Biden, it was expected that the US might return to JCPOA and the tension between the two states would decrease. However, owing to Iran's advances in the region and the drone supplies to Russia in the Ukraine war, the US-Iran dialogue could not materialise. The relations between the two states have also nosedived after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 which led to the deployment of a US aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea and the activation of Iran-backed 'Axis of Resistance' that has sowed further complications in the bilateral relations between the two states.

Russian Interests

The Russian involvement in the Middle East dates back to the cold war politics. In an attempt to expand its influence, the then-Soviet Union tried to formulate ties with states that were primarily anti-imperialist. In this regard, three states proved to be major allies of the Soviet Union during the Cold War: Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The Soviet Union cultivated strong ties with the communist parties of these states as well as the ruling Baath Party which promised the *socialist way of*

life. The Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 allowed the Soviet Union to cement its ties with Egypt. It was followed by the economic assistance of 700 million Rubles by the Soviet Union in 1958.²⁶ In military terms, Egypt received arms supplies worth \$250-400 million in 1957 and a \$280 million loan which could be utilised for military purposes as well.²⁷ In the 1967 Arab-Israel War, the Soviet Union provided Egypt with 476 fighter jets, 6 destroyers, and 18 patrol boats along with other ammunition.²⁸ Yet, after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser and specifically after 1973, Soviet relations with Egypt deteriorated as then-Egyptian President Anwar Sadat reoriented Egypt's policy towards the US.

Secondly, Iraq, after the revolution of 1958, also proved to be an arena where the Soviet Union could expand its influence. The nationalist coup of Iraq eroded its relations with the US and resultantly brought it closer to the Soviet Union as the counterbalance. In 1954-76, Iraq became the second largest recipient of any Soviet grant to less-developed countries with a total of \$699 million.²⁹ From 1968 to 1975, owing to Iraq's conflict with Iran and the resurgence of Kurdish fighters, the USSR sold weapons worth \$1.7 billion to Iraq.³⁰ However, once Iraq's issues with Iran were resolved and its huge oil revenue made it the prime state for the West, Soviet-Iraq relations remained weaker.³¹ Eventually, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) made Iraq a close ally of the US and the cautious policy of the Soviet Union towards the conflict further weakened the relations between the two states.

Lastly, Soviet relations with Syria also had its roots in the anti-imperialist and anti-Israel rhetoric of the latter. As Syria did not receive any military assistance from the West, it turned to the Soviet Union in 1956 for its military requirements. For thirty years, the Soviet Union provided Syria with security assurances in the wake of Türkiye's offence in 1957, the Arab-Israel War of 1967, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon in 1982.³² Relations between the two were rejuvenated after the Baathist coup in 1966 when the

Soviet Union granted an economic assistance of \$133 million to Syria and the trade steadily grew to 118 million Rubles in 1973.³³ On the military front, during the first five years of the 1980s, Soviet military support to Syria reached over \$8 billion, the largest in that era to any other country.³⁴ However, towards the end of the cold war, as the Soviet Union struggled internally, its relations with Syria experienced stagnation.

In the post-cold war era, the initial phase saw only the minimum and symbolic role of Russia in the Middle East largely due to its own fragmentation and internal crisis. After the rise of President Vladimir Putin, Russia started to play a more active role in the region for two reasons. First, the civil war in its Chechnya region forced Russia to reach out to Muslim countries to discourage the penetration of extremism into its territory. Second, being apprehensive of the US unilateralism, Russia tried to reassert itself as a global power.³⁵ The overall strategy of the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia was to nurture anti-US regimes in the Middle East during the cold war and to revive its political partnerships in the post-cold war period. In line with this policy, the major involvement of Russia in the region occurred in the post-Arab Spring period owing to two factors, i.e., the US military withdrawal and the Syrian civil war.

Strategic Interests

The strategic interests of Russia in the Middle East can be categorised into two branches, i.e., arms sales (security) and energy (economic). The Syrian civil war provided Russia with the opportunity to materialise all these objectives. Firstly, by maintaining a military presence inside Syria, Russia has been able to keep its access to strategic ports like Latakia and Tartus, which provide a path into the Mediterranean Sea. Both of these ports host Russian air and naval forces, respectively, and hence are vital for an expanded Russian influence all across the eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East. These military bases allow Russia to test its weapons in the Syrian civil

war and advertise them to potential customers. Hence, Russia has already installed its S-400 air defence system in Syria and sold weaponry like T-72 and T-90 battle tanks, Su-25 fighter aircraft as well as Su-35 fighter aircraft for bombing purposes.³⁶ The utilisation and manoeuvrability of these weapons attracted many regional states towards their purchase. Türkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have shown their interest in purchasing the S-400 air defence system of Russia while the UAE has also negotiated to purchase fighter jets from Russia.³⁷

Secondly, by assisting the Assad Regime and preventing it from collapsing, Russia has made inroads into the larger Middle Eastern region in terms of economy. Russia is already developing a gas pipeline that would run across Türkiye to finally reach the European markets. The Turkish Stream Pipeline project was signed in 2014 between Russia and Turkey and aimed at consolidating Russia's energy monopoly in Europe while thwarting rival projects like that of the Qatar-Türkiye pipeline proposed in 2009.³⁸ Similarly, another gas pipeline project named the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, signed in 2011—would run from the South Pars Gas Field of Iran to Iraq and Syria while eventually reaching Europe—is expected to generate competition for Russia's energy politics. Nevertheless, due to the sanctions on Russia after the Ukraine war, these gas pipeline projects are halted if not cancelled completely. In the oil sector, Russia also faces competition from the OPEC states, mainly Saudi Arabia. Both states have competed for the sale of their oil to China and Europe. Cooperation with the Gulf states becomes much more significant for Russia to turn competition into cooperation. Although Russia had managed to negotiate the deal with the Saudi-led OPEC group in 2016 over oil pricing, their oil war in 2020 manifested the growing discontent between the two parties. For Russia, relations with the Gulf States are important for their investments within its borders. Saudi Arabia is aiming to invest \$5 billion in the Russian LNG sector while the UAE has shares in Russian

helicopter companies.³⁹ Furthermore, the Russian inability to sustain oil production and prices for more than a week in the 2020 oil war with Saudi Arabia, forced it to resolve the crisis by agreeing to keep the oil output at the pre-crisis level. Hence, the Middle East has emerged as an important arena for Russia to revive its global status.

Politics

The political interests of Russia in the Middle East revolve around revitalising its image as a global player. Russia has always opposed the US military presence in the region and opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. To foster this view, Russia cemented ties with the anti-US forces in the region, notably Iran and its proxies. Russia and Iran have cooperated militarily in Syria against the US goal of deposing Assad from power. Russia has also collaborated with Hezbollah and jointly undertook military operations with Hezbollah fighters against ISIS and anti-Assad forces, especially in the liberation of Aleppo.⁴⁰ Moreover, Russia has also initiated diplomatic efforts to defuse the Syrian crisis through the Astana peace process along with Iran and Türkiye. Furthermore, Russia has agreed to jointly patrol the border region between Türkiye and Syria and, hence, shown flexibility over Türkiye concerns about the Kurds despite having opposing views regarding the future of Syria and the military conflict in *Idlib* which resulted in the deaths of over 30 Turkish soldiers in 2020.⁴¹ This has brought Türkiye into close cooperation with Russia despite being a NATO ally of the US.

Russia rejuvenated its ties with major GCC states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the second decade of the 21st century. Due to the oil and gas capacity of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it is in the interest of Russia to formulate economic ties instead of being apprehensive towards these states. This policy of maintaining close ties with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar was reflected during the Qatar Crisis where Russia maintained a neutral posture and continued sharing mutual economic ties with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁴² Likewise, Russia

preferred to engage with every actor involved in the Yemen crisis without taking any sides and hosted Saudi-backed Hadi's government, Houthis' representatives and UAE-backed Southern Transition Council's delegation.⁴³ These evidences reflect that Russia does not have any substantial political strategy for the Middle East. Mainly, it relies upon its partnership with Iran to counter the US policies and maximise its interests. Nevertheless, Russian political interests in the region are vaguely defined vis-à-vis regional actors. However, if the US continues its policy of disengaging from the region, Russia could embolden itself to play into the political proceedings of the region more actively and assertively.

Chinese Interests

China has always remained a marginal player in the Middle East. At the event of its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) found itself engulfed in the bipolar proceedings of the cold war. Despite being associated with the Soviet Union, China adopted the policy of non-alignment after participating in the Bandung Conference (1955) and voiced its support for the liberation of Asian and African countries. The direct and comprehensive engagement of China with the Middle East was hindered due to two reasons: the strong diplomatic bond of Middle Eastern states with the US and the non-recognition of the PRC in the UN under US pressure.⁴⁴ However, against this backdrop, China did not stop to support revolutionary struggles against Western imperialism in the region. One such example is the Chinese support to the 1958 revolution of Iraq which overthrew the Western-backed monarchy and led to the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. China not only backed the 1958 coup but also competed with the Soviet Union for influence over the Iraqi Communist Party which led to the deteriorating relations between the two states.⁴⁵ China also supplied arms to Palestinian guerrilla movements in their struggle against Israel in the mid-1960s in the form of light weapons: AK-47 assault rifles,

Kalashnikovs, and anti-tank arms.⁴⁶ Similarly, to influence southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf in the wake of the British naval dominance, China supported the Dhofar Uprising during the late 1960s and early 1970s in Oman against the forces loyal to the western-backed Sultan by providing training and arms and ammunition along with the indoctrination of the Marxist views among the tribal forces called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG).⁴⁷

During the 1970s, China made a foreign policy shift by normalising its relations with both the US and its allies in the Middle East. In 1971, both Iran and Kuwait established diplomatic relations with China.⁴⁸ As the US recognised China as the “only legitimate representative of Chinese people” in the UNSC through the resolution of 2758, many Middle Eastern states like Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Kuwait along with the north African Arab states including Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco in 1971 favoured it.⁴⁹ This also led to the normalisation of ties between China and the other Gulf Arab countries of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE which transformed into full diplomatic relations in the 1980s. China’s interaction with the Middle Eastern states also solidified after 1979 mainly after the opening up of its economy and provision of arms in the Iraq-Iran war. According to estimates, China sold weapons worth \$3.9 billion in 1986-90 to Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia combined, hence, preserving the delicate balance between all the three major powers of the region while maintaining the policy of non-interference.⁵⁰

In the post-Cold War era, China began to get involved in the Middle East to explore its economic potential. Ties with regional states were also important for China to prevent the US dominance of the regional energy resources which could have been threatening for China given the souring of relations with the US over the incident of Tiananmen Square in 1989. Hence, through strengthening energy cooperation with the Gulf states, China prevented a backlash from the

US while by collaborating with Iran over its nuclear program, it continued to challenge US dominance in the region in the 1990s. On the diplomatic front, China continued to oppose US policies in both Gulf wars (1991 and 2003) yet did not counter them directly. Instead, it accelerated its diplomatic and economic engagement with the Middle East. In the following years, China imported more than half of its oil requirements from the Middle East, especially from Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁵¹ Economic cooperation further strengthened with the inception of the 21st century as China formulated the foreign policy of *going global*. In the first decade, China imported a vast amount of oil and gas from the Gulf states in exchange for exporting material products like mechanics and textiles. As per the China Customs Statistics Yearbook of 2009, China imported 25.82 per cent from Saudi Arabia, 11.25 per cent from Oman, above 4 per cent from Kuwait and above 3 per cent from the UAE, of its total oil imports.⁵² The mutual investment relations also accelerated as China's stock of investments grew from \$33.63 million in 2003 to over \$1 billion in 2008 in the GCC states.⁵³ Hence, with this background, China's interests in the Middle East are primarily economic which entail in themselves security objectives as well that are discussed in the next section.

Economic

Middle East is of vital importance for China especially in the economic and energy sectors. China's engagement in the Middle East takes place on multilateral and bilateral levels. The multilateral engagement refers to China's cooperation with the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This started in 2010 when China established strategic cooperation with the Arab League and later expanded it into a strategic partnership in 2018. Bilateral engagement refers to China's bilateral relations with individual countries of the Middle East like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE.

China's partners in the region can be classified into four categories as mentioned by Degang Sun.⁵⁴ The first category is the

'pivot states' that are hubs for China's global network like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These countries are economically and politically strong and are vital for securing Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea. The second category is known as the 'node states'. These are the states that are given special status by China as they serve as a bridge between China and the great powers. This category includes Israel and Türkiye. Türkiye is a gateway that provides access to China to reach the European markets. Israel is a facilitator of cooperation between China and the US. The third category is that of 'key states'. These are the countries that do have developmental potential but are entangled in domestic instability. However, these countries can exert considerable influence on the neighbouring countries while promoting Chinese interests regionally. These countries include Iraq, Morocco, and Sudan. The last category comprises states like Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. These are small countries but exhibit a high degree of economic cooperation with China. These are strongholds for securing specific Chinese interests in the region.

In the Middle East, China moves with great caution. While expanding its interests in the region, it tries to avoid getting entangled in any conflict. Primarily, the Israel-Palestine conflict is an issue of concern for China. Moreover, instability in Syria and Yemen is also a concerning factor for China. China has economic and energy interests in the Middle East which sometimes take the shape of strategic interests when it comes to dealing with US interests in the region. Although China tries to avoid confrontation with the US, its rise in the Middle East threatens US interests in the region. For example, the US has a hostile attitude towards Iran but it is one of the first and the most important Chinese allies in the region. Iran has the 4th largest reserves of crude oil and 2nd largest reserves of gas in the world which makes Iran an energy superpower. China and Iran have also signed the \$400 billion strategic deal which largely entails economic cooperation.

China has also established relations with other important Middle Eastern countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Moreover, among the six corridors of China's BRI, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor passes through the Middle East. It connects China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Once this corridor is functional, there will be several economic and trade opportunities for the Middle Eastern countries as well. Israel is an important player in China's global ambitions. Both countries established formal diplomatic relations in 1992. Since then they have furthered their cooperation in sectors of energy, economy, technology, and military. Both have also cooperated closely in research and technology.

The Current Policies of the US, Russia, and China: An Analysis

The Ukraine conflict has brought a significant change in the international system which has impacted every region of the world. While a majority of the regions faced challenges like food shortages, energy crises, and economic and political instability, for the Middle East, the conflict brought opportunities as the majority of the regional states remained neutral.

For the US, the Middle East has again gained significance as an alternative source of energy for its European allies that have sanctioned Russian energy exports. This resulted in the intensification of US efforts to expand the normalisation process between Israel and the Arab states including the KSA. Apart from them, the conflict between Hamas and Israel after the October 07 attacks has invited the US military into the region as well. While the extent of the US military participation in the conflict is yet to be seen, it is highly unlikely that the US would get involved in another Middle Eastern conflict alongside the Ukraine war and the South China Sea. It is so because the US participation might result in its over-exhaustion. Furthermore, given the unequivocal support of the US for Israel in its airstrikes and attacks on Gaza, the credibility of the US as an unbiased mediator is

highly questionable. These developments suggest that the current policy of the US towards the Middle East is yet to be reshaped, especially after when the Arab-Israel normalisation process stalled after October 2023. As Russia became more sanctioned, consolidation of its ties with the regional states has become more important. The Russo-Iranian partnership blossomed in the wake of the Ukraine war in two aspects. First, Iran became the only country that supplied its weapons (drones) to Russia which proved valuable in Russian operations in Ukraine. Second, as the sea routes of Russia in the Baltic, Mediterranean, and Pacific waters came under increased scrutiny by the Western powers, it invigorated the 'International North-South Corridor (INSC)' with India for which Iran became the pivotal state due to its strategic location. With the Arab states, Russia has aligned its interests in the energy sector by maintaining high oil prices. This has brought Russia in close cooperation with the GCC states which are also the channels for Russia to re-export its energy into Europe.⁵⁵ Finally, for China, the Ukraine War came as an opportunity to scale up its interaction with the Middle East. As the US focused more on the Ukraine War and the issue of Taiwan due to the fear that China might follow in Russian footsteps, the neglect it fostered towards the Middle East allowed China to emerge as a new peacemaker in the region. This was reflected in the March 2023 diplomatic rapprochement between Iran and KSA that was mediated by China. In doing so, China not only elevated its position in the region but also consolidated its bilateral and multilateral engagements with regional states.

The policies of both Russia and China are the continuation of their pre-existing objectives. The Ukraine War provided the impetus for both these states to further enhance and streamline their *modus operandi* in the region which has borne fruit. For the US, however, it was a drastic shift in the policy towards the Middle East. As discussed, the US has been more focused on the Asia Pacific region and was in the process of decreasing its engagement in the Middle East. The

neutrality of the Gulf allies and the energy crisis in Europe forced the US to re-engage with the region. Furthermore, the normalisation of Israel in the region and the joint bloc of US allies against Iran in the region did not materialise as it was initially anticipated mainly due to the persistent attacks by Israel on Gaza. The increased support of the US to Israel coupled with its relatively silent response over the humanitarian crisis that has persisted in Gaza, diminished the US scope for being the net security provider in the region. The perception was further strengthened when the GCC states managed to resolve their issues with Iran through diplomatic channels, facilitated by China. On the other hand, the border conflict between Syria and Türkiye is being managed by Russia to avoid escalation. These developments reflect that the traditional relations between external powers and regional states have been shifting as regional states are in the quest to find alternative global partners and elevate themselves for the indigenous security apparatus.

Conclusion

For the last 100 years, the Middle East has attracted the involvement of external powers for both its strategic location as well as vast energy resources. For the most part, the relationship between the external actors and regional states was that of patron-client relations, specifically in the context of the US-GCC partnership and USSR relations with the revisionist Arab states, i.e., Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. While utilising the patronage of external powers, regional states consolidated their status both within the region as well as for their domestic audience. However, certain factors like the Arab Spring, the decline of the Arab world, the global shift towards multi-polarity, and the disengagement of the US, shifted the regional landscape as well as the status quo. This motivated regional non-Arab states to embark on a quest to fill the power vacuum left by the US. For the Arab states, the struggle to find alternatives to the US was paramount. This allowed both Russia and China to enter into the Middle Eastern region. Their

mutual discontent towards the US policies along with their ambitions to showcase their global status brought both of them in alignment with the regional states. It is important to highlight that the entry of Russia and China and their dependency on the region for its energy resources and potential customers of defence equipment transformed the patron-client relation into a more equal partnership. This also emboldened the Middle Eastern states. This is evident from Russian dependency on Iranian drones and Europe's reliance on Middle Eastern oil. Chinese stakes are also significant as it moved towards assuming a more proactive role by mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, for the perceivable future, external powers, particularly China, Russia, and the US, are believed to enhance their presence in the region with close association of regional Arab and non-Arab states. While it is true that the US has shifted its focus towards Ukraine and the Asia Pacific, the persistence of the Palestine-Israel conflict and the reorientation of the GCC towards China and Russia, along with the rising power of Iran and its proxy partners, would inevitably force the US to rediscover its role in the Middle East.

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