

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### USA-CHINA ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Muhammad Owais, Ashfaq Ahmed, Sadaf Ghayoor, Saima Kausar. Usa-China Economic and Strategic Competition in The Middle East -- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 19(2), 263-274. ISSN 1567-214x**

**Key Words: Middle East, China, USA, Introduction, Economic**

#### **ABSTRACT**

United States of America (USA) and China, in the recent times are at loggerheads with each other. From trade war to increasing their spheres of influence, USA and China are getting entangled in different regions of the world Middle East is one of those crucial areas. Middle East has attracted attention and triggered rivalries among many world powers throughout the history. It is primarily because of the massive natural resources trading routes and sea lanes of communications. In pursuit to establish a global world order any major power, would need to consolidate its power in Middle Eastern region. This paper aims to explain strategic and economic interests to understand dynamics of USA-China rivalry in Middle East. Paper underlines Chinese application of neo-liberal approach for the Middle East. It highlights potential for Sino-US Cold War.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Middle Eastern region is volatile and unstable political and economic environment and it has huge natural resources. The region has remained in the focus of the world powers throughout history, more especially in the last decade. Middle East enjoys significant geo-strategic location. It has enormous potential of economic growth and development due to natural resources and proximity to

international water channels. Political instability following Arab spring and rise of extremist factions crippled the region economically and politically. War torn states like Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Iraq have rendered economic and political stability impossible, hurling entire region in an economic and political chaos. Political and economic conditions serve as an unintended call for great powers to intervene. It resulted in world power rivalries during last century and continues to do so in contemporary. However, in recent times a marked difference from the traditional rivalries is observed. The on-ground proxy wars of last century have assumed the shape of economic and strategic competitions in recent times. Now the great powers are more focused at exploiting the natural economic resources of the region and bringing the entire regions in their spheres of influence. Another markedly different scenario is the emergence of rivalry between United States of America (USA) and China.

President Trump's era had been markedly different from the previous presidents of USA. It was in his era that US-China rivalry assumed a more aggressive posture. From increasing tariffs on imports to banning firms and companies, trade war has become more hostile and threatening global peace prospects.

This paper aims to explain strategic and economic interests to understand dynamics of USA-China rivalry in Middle East. Paper underlines implications of this rivalry for the region and neighboring states.

#### ***Background of US-China rivalry:***

In 2010 China's emergence as a global economic power raised apprehensions among US's Western allies who started to see China as an emerging competitor. The relations saw a steep downfall especially after the American elections of 2016 when President Trump gained office (Zhang, 2020). This initiated the infamous trade war between US and China. Currently, US-China rivalry cannot be seen in isolation with the different technological and economic domains of the relations. The tech-war, trade war, ideological war, arms race and hegemonic designs of both the states have instilled a fear and apprehensions in political observers. It is believed increased economic/ technological interdependence between USA and China prevents formations of blocks and the possibility of the outbreak of traditional cold war. Secondly, they are not involved in proxy wars against each other. Lastly, in this integrated global economic system USA and China both do not aim to spread and extend their influence to third world countries (Tran, 2021). Presumably, these relations do not have the capacity or willingness to transform into heated cold war or world war, at least in near future. A new cold war is not as predictable as it seemed, the interests of major powers in the Middle Eastern region needs some kind of explanations. Presently, US and China rivalry had attained a more aggressive nature. China's belt and road initiative (BRI) and America's military and political dominance are factors that need to be analyzed. Paper separately explains and analyzes America's and China's economic and strategic goals in interests in the region.

### *China's Strategic Goals in the Middle East*

Middle East bears significance for its proximity with various sea lanes and sea ports. Great powers have aimed at establishing their spheres of influence in the region. Presently, US is seemingly planning to vacate the region. However, security and strategic stakes are very high (Mashino, 2020). Critics believe in US absence China will have the opportunity to cement its foothold in the region. Contrary to this China in US dominated presence has developed strong trading ties with Middle Eastern states. For example, China became Saudi Arab's largest and Israel's second largest trading partner in 2019. Beijing is gradually establishing security and economic ties with Middle Eastern states by selling arms, missiles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) technology. China and Iran signed agreement to build Chabahar port and other technological and security ties. It cannot be analyzed without keeping in mind US-Iran rivalry (Michnik, 2021). China has managed to adopt a neutral and balanced stance in the regional conflicts of the region like that of Iran and Saudi Arab or Turkey Israel, it is questionable if it can continue to do so in coming years. China has economic interests and goals in the region. China's BRI project will connect it to Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) region. BRI will provide China access to Europe, Africa and Middle East. It will aid China in occupying the center of global trade.

Chinese official documents do not entail any kind of security or strategic goal in the region but Chinese actions state otherwise. China has established its first military base outside its territory in Djibouti and has also started militarizing Gwadar as a pretext to its protecting CPEC (Lons, 2019). The series of military bases commonly known as string of pearls also highlight increasing militarization by China.

Though China is involved militarily to some extent in Middle East but its involvement is limited to selling of arms and ammunitions. Unlike US, China does not aim to assume the shape of a powerful hegemon. It aims to establish and integrate itself as an economic power (Habibi, 2020). But it is predicted by scholars and experts that declining military presence of US will ultimately force China to become the next dominant power in the region. It is due to the fact that so far China has relied on security status quo of US, after US withdrawal China will need to safeguard its economic interests itself that will ultimately push it to becoming next major power in the region (Cook, 2021).

Michael Pillsbury, in his book "hundred-year marathon" has outlined Chinese policy of "Inducing Complacency". Pillsbury, in his book, has highlighted that US has itself aided China in becoming a world power. He outlines the policy of 'Inducing Complacency' that is followed by Chinese government. This policy visualizes China's deceptive aims to give a complacent outlook while working to achieve Chinese dreams. Michael asserts that China follows such strategies that does not outwardly look violent or aggressive but allows it to gain sufficient power and integration. By the time its actual goals become clear, China will have gathered sufficient power to deter its rivals and nothing could be done to reverse the consequences (Pillsbury, 2016).

China's strategic goals in the region are unclear to date. Though China is increasingly involving itself in economic development of the region through initiative like BRI, it has kept its security and strategic aspects hidden. Nevertheless, with changing Chinese behavior and its increasing assertiveness, it can be assumed that China has some underlying goals.

### *United States Strategic Goals in Middle East*

US strategies in the Middle East have been recognized by its efforts to protect natural resources and to maintain peace and prosperity of regional states, US believes Middle Eastern states are faced with different threats from Russia and China. Arab spring can be said as the major turn out for the US because there were civilians reactions to the governments and unrests which challenged the US control in the region. Iran and Hezbollah also collectively tries to counter US in Syria. Different terrorist groups in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon etc have been a challenging part for the US from a long-time. Terrorists' groups like al Qaeda, Taliban, Hezbollah act as freedom fighters for the specific states but for US they come under the umbrella of terrorist's organizations. The second issue of Palestine and Israel is needed to be halted because in the end US would have to support one which would end into other turning into an adversary.

In 2020 US major policy in the Middle East was to ensure that "Middle East is not a safe haven for the terrorists". There are three different aspects of how the US is involved in the region as follows

1. US has adopted the policy in which it makes relations with one of the states so that state could cut off with the other state. Policy is aimed at adopting to enhance its relations with different states and keeping other states apart from each other. This way the states would make better relations with US. For example, the US has been investing a lot in the security of the Israel even supporting its stance for Palestine so the other Muslims states cannot counter it collectively even if they want to. The "big 3" states i.e., the Egypt, Jordan and Israel have more than 6\$ billion shares globally which is the largest part of the shares received. These are the even major 3 states which need to stay away from the other states and be dependent on USA to help it achieve its mission. **Invalid source specified.**

### *Traditional Threat Management:*

The US policy towards Iran was not to counter Iran and it was not to counter the Iran nuclear program but now the strategy of the US towards Iran is to counter its nuclear program not by force but by making bilateral relations through the negotiations. The second issue of the ISIS can be countered majorly by two policies being adopted i.e., number one to attack and impose forces on the certain specific areas where the terrorists have location, secondly to destabilize the Syria would be like destabilizing the ISIS because that land is full of ISIS activities.

### *Role of the global leaders:*

Russia has a major goal which is to arms sales and security in the Middle East lands. Water is also a main goal for Russia due to which it is improving its connectivity in these lands. Secondly China is improving its presence in the and through the road and belt initiative. Despite differences both have a major and same interest that Iranian nuclear agreement is revived as soon as possible. Russia and China are working in this domain to get that agreement accepted.

### *US policy for the Middle East today*

It is said that the US has adopted many of the de facto policies for the Middle East now.

- US militarily withdrew from Syria and scrapped the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA).
- Personal relationships between the Trump and Netanyahu resulted into making some alliances however, it had resulted into longer advantages. Netanyahu's opposition to several countries prevented US from reviving regional alliances. It weekends the office because of the disproportionate focus on the state like Tunisia, Morocco etc **Invalid source specified...**
- Policy of rhetoric rather than concrete clear plans to resolve conflict with Iran, lack of engagement with Iraq, armed withdrawal from Syria despite ISIS presence and then complete neglect of Yemen proved to be suicidal for US. Today, US has started making alliances with Middle Eastern states to contain China. Prescribed strategy for US is to apply soft power rather than hard power because Chinese influence has increased. In case of major regional conflict over Palestine Middle East will split into US and anti US camps. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and region's extended neighbor Afghanistan will form anti-US camp.

### *US Economic Goals in Middle East*

In post-Cold War era US interest in Middle East can be characterized in four parts to make it less complex. This area is the hub of oil, its enrichment in sparse resources attracts the whole world, specially developed nations who need these resources for their industrialization process **Invalid source specified...**

Middle Eastern region is surrounded by asymmetrical powers locked in security dilemma because of regional conflicts and conventional arms race. It increases potential for nuclear proliferation. Therefore, US significant aim is to counter nuclear proliferation.

Diplomats, scholars and researches believe that combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the whole Middle East in the early 2000's was less than France total GDP. Currency depreciation, joblessness, low income and low prospects of future better life increases frustration among people. It pushes them to join terrorist outfits like Afghanistan based Taliban, ISIS, AL Qaeda and interstate conflicts in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Massacre, ethnic cleansing as well

as terrorism in the name of religion grew and since most of these states were weak, US had to intervene.

Lastly, promoting democratization is also an important factor that cannot be overlooked. It is not only limited to Middle East but also every part of the world since the post-Cold war era. The major aim of Washington is to make sure that all developing countries have adopted democracy and free market economy hence US influence would expand to these states. Further, their dependence would increase on US enabling it to preserve its interests **Invalid source specified**. The US potential interests in the Middle East are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

### ***OIL***

The Middle Eastern countries though produce oil but they do not consume it. America made sure that these countries export it to US allies. By 2015, the Gulf countries produced quarter of the world oil which was majorly consumed by America. Meaning, the economic market of America which was dependent on oil had to have a strong link with Gulf countries. America saw Gulf countries as a vital interest. Former President Obama introduced protectionist policies by producing American oil instead of importing it. Today, US no longer view this region as of vital importance **Invalid source specified**...

### ***Military***

America's military budget overcomes developing countries annual profit. A theory suggests that all ongoing conflicts can be resolved if United Nations (UN) or America wants them to be resolved. Conflicts force states to pursue military modernization process by relying on US arms export. US military sales create job opportunities for American people at home and increase its foreign reserves. Therefore, US has no interest in resolving regional conflicts.

### ***Economy***

West believes Middle East is important due to geo politics and oil resources it is willing to help them in these fields. The plan states that this can be done through generating sustainable growth, stabilizing market, creating employment, introducing liberalization policies etc. Major problem or hurdle in this is trade, the loss of hope within the market due to different crises and corruption. West is trying to apply new measures such as cooperating with regional institutions to stabilize this wide region by eradicating terrorism. It will bring peace and only then can the ultimate importance that Middle East hold for America as well as the whole world can be dressed out. For that, different developments have taken place between America and different countries such as Saudi Arab, Israel, UAE and Jordan. This not only helped increase the trade but also made strong reliable allies that are required in this globalized world. It is observed that countries that have been allies with USA in this region for example, Egypt, Israel, and Saudi have flourished. Others like Syria, Palestine, Iraq has differences with USA over different interest and have

not been able to get back on their feet and develop. So, creating reliable allies is important.

“Greater Middle East” strategy was put forward which is in progress to be achieved following measures such as good governance without corruption. A society with immense knowledge and modernized techniques since that take a society towards progress and enlightenment. Lastly West is endeavoring to expand economic opportunities, invite foreign investment, new business and field of work that can create more jobs and with that whole process a stabilized country and then a stabilized as well as reliable region as whole **Invalid source specified...** Challenges emanating from terrorism, civil wars, ongoing state differences, anti-American stance, regional conflicts and instability are a hurdle towards achieving above goals **Invalid source specified...**

### *Chinese Economic Goals in Middle East*

The Middle Eastern economies are diverting their ties from America toward China, which is economically powerful and getting stronger day after day. This shift in longstanding ties is expected to bring long lasting implications in the region’s dynamics, which includes both political and economic aspect (elnaggar, 2020 ). Following are some factors on which the approach of China towards Middle East can be assigned as

- China needs a steady flow of gases and oils from Middle East and North Africa for energy need, economic growth goals and the interests of national security. This is very necessary for China because of its bad terms with US and it is expected to further deteriorate in near future.
- China emphasizes regions steady stability cannot be achieved without economic development. Its main priority for Middle East is to bring stability.
- Chinese authorities are working on expanding China’s influence in Middle East through BRI, part of Chinese constitution. In 2016, 2018 President Xi Jinping visited the region to increase partnership with the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. China’s moves were reciprocated by these leaders. Abdel FatehellSisi President of Egypt visited China for more than six times to sign big scale economic agreements. The motive of leaders is to make their bilateral relations and economic ties stronger.

Several other countries from Middle East and North African region have made their strategies align with BRI to achieve sustainable development. In economic drivers, sustainability comes at the top of the list along with the political necessity. Health issues and other major problems arise more when states start looking for alternative better options for oil and energy. China is expanding more and more in this field and working on promoting green development in Middle East and North African region. Transnational engagements benefitted China to become region’s biggest investor. It started construction projects for infrastructure development involving Chinese labors and companies in the Arab region. Beijing is helping region’s banking sector. China is helping people in

the region to acquire concessional loans for commercial projects. Trade between Middle East and China has surpassed twenty hundred and forty-five billion dollars. Today, the region has more Chinese private companies manifests that China has captured local markets. Presumably, China's economic, political and strategic relations with further strengthen with Middle Eastern countries. Middle East's states increasing dependence will provide China leverage to get involve in their bilateral conflicts.

China's incorporation in the region is fraught with hurdles and difficulties due to US concerns. It has yet to be seen how US will counter Chinese growing influence and how China will respond/ counter it.

### ***Implications of US-China Strategic Competition in Middle East***

Middle East's natural reserves, energy resources like crude oil, gas, and petrol attract global attention of major powers. US is the main actor/ hegemon in this region. It maintains substantial military presence e.g. fifth fleet and seventh fleet. However, emerging powers like China, Saudi, and Iran have their presence. Abovementioned actors influence the making of global policies of different states towards this region. Growing multilateralism China's growing influence makes this region a playground of major emerging and existing powers. Civil war, sectarian conflicts, political crisis and humanitarian crisis are basic features of this region.

### ***Future implications of Sino-US strategic competition in Biden's Administration***

The US maintains military, security, and strategic influence in the region. Contrarily, China is increasing its alliances by signing trade agreements with countries having regional, strategic, or economic influence to maintain an influence in the region. Biden administration is striving to reshape its strategic approximations in the Middle East especially security strategies. The US new preferences for the region include partial withdrawal of its security role from the Middle East. It is due to the declining importance of the Middle East strengthening the China strategic position in this region that could further contest the region. Yet, it is difficult to predict that the US will leave its strategic ground for any other player like China or Russia. Importance of this region for the US is quite evident by the case of stacking of ever given Cargo in Suez Canal and disrupting of the waterway.

China's advances in technological realm and in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) made it peer competitor to US. Beijing's leading role in AI and advancement in technology endows it to expand its influence or cement its position in the Middle East. It can lead these states to wage "technological cold war". China's technological advancement accelerates its ratio of success in BRI. The substance of the matter is US would not leave a ground for China as it is ready to create influence in this region so the US strategic withdrawal is not possible.



***The future expectations and implications of Sino-US rivalry and their comparative strength in the Middle East and the impact of US-China polarization in the middle east:***

The Middle East is the vital region of the sphere where the interests of many major powers intersect. To normalize the strategic pressure among them, China tried to have bilateral talks to avoid this strategic polarization. As far as the matter of the US leaving the middle east region is quite impossible and if do so, China and Russia as emerging powers would rise in the region to get the most privileges. Russia could maintain a strategic balance and China will not break its strategic economic agreements and will try to create economic strategic influence through economic strengthening projects but the situations are quite different in terms that China or Russia could create a strategic and security balance in the region like the US is maintaining because of its long history of influence and experience. China has made some agreements like its strategic partnership with Iran of Tehran on March 25, 2021, and this has also been remarked by chine foreign minister Wang Yi “its legitimate interest in having relation with Iran”. China is supposed to spread its influence by signing several economic and commercial agreements. The same is with Russia that which is also ready to create influence as evident in its involvement in Syria. In this regard, NATO is also an important player in countering Russia by easing the US and other European alliances in this region as the intentions of Russia are quite expansionist. Although China is capable of pressurizing the US on many regional issues economically the fact is that the countries like China or Russia cannot be an alternative to the US because of its long-lasting and unlimited alliances and actors following based on its funding. This scenario can create a sense that fierce competition is expecting in the future that would influence the foreign policies of major powers and ultimately of the other countries around the world.

***The Impact of Sino-US Polarization in the Middle East Two Visions***

Because of having rich resources, the Middle East has ever gained the special attention of major world powers positively or negatively. China and the US are currently influencing regional activities although these countries are avoiding confrontation anywhere in the world. The expected future implications of US-China strategic competition have probably two theorems/ views as follows

***Avoidance of Confrontation to keep the Status-quo***

This school of thought negates Sino-US direct military confrontation. It believes China will emerge as a major power without threatening the US influence, its position and clout. Reciprocal friendly relations are expected among influencing powers and regional countries. All countries except Syria and Iran are quite satisfied with US in economic, military, and strategic realms. China is developing good relations with all regional countries preferably in the economic field. Moreover, China and US are working cooperatively in energy security fields. As, both the countries are energy resources seeking countries so both want equal and satisfying distribution of resources among themselves. It is

expected that there could be room for calm for China as emerging power and US insistence to impede the Chinese dragon.

Regional countries can accrue diverse benefits from both major powers. They can create good relations with both poles of the globe. China is advancing technological level (providing 5G), making contributions in establishing good infrastructure and renewable energy projects (both solar and nuclear) exponentially at a very low price.

The US is present in this region for the past several decades. It has signed agreements in many fields like security, armament, and investment partnership that had benefited several people living in this region. An accord, Ibrahim accord has been signed between Israel and other Arab countries. The accord is also advancing US position. It puts the burden of the dispute on the shoulders of disputed parties. Hegemonic power present in the region cannot be held responsible for deteriorating peace.

US is criticized because former administration of the US intervene in Syria to stop the mass killing and to maintain peace. However, Trump withdrew US forces from Syria just after controlling the administration. Regional countries are more inclined towards China and Russia as forging and trading partners in different fields. Like Russia's military is still present in Syria and Libya and its economic connections with Egypt, Algeria and Saudi-Arabia could revive its position in the Middle Eastern region. Russia has assisted Bashar-Al-Assad against western pressure and Russia's emergence could alternate the US in providing weapons to Saudi-Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar. Russia also complied with Turkey to raise voice against the US. The regional countries appreciate that despite its strategic and economic power Chinese foreign policy is based on principles of non-intervention and neutrality.

The best thing about China is also that it is not posing a biased position in resolving disputes among the regional states like the between Saudi Arabia and Iran and is also quite neutral in the Palestine-Israel conflict. Moreover, regional countries are quite attracted to China's economic initiatives like the belt and road initiative to get the most benefit.

### ***Tensions and Policies of Escalation, the Threshold of the Cold War***

This school of thought believes that Sino-US increasing competition is heading towards new era of polarization. Political wrangling at an international organization like the UN Security Council and the international atomic energy agency (IAEA) is apparent. For instance, there is a difference between the Iranian nuclear file and the Syrian case as both US and China levers to pursue their interests.

US and China's strategies are quite apparent in their domestic and foreign policies that show their policies of 'action' and 'reaction.' It is apparent that both are trying to contain each other with a direct face-off. The US policy approaches are based on intellect and normative one. It believes spread of

democracy throughout the world will result in prosperity. Further, military rule or concept of security state cannot be alternatives to democracy.

China had attempted to counter the US 'heading eastward' by its political movement 'heading westward'. This shows that both powers are deeply cautious about each other's military and political interference in the region. China also forges to escalate in military and security perspectives as evident by its recent agreement with Iran that is not merely limited to economic means but they are going to use their military bases as a way of energy flow for waterways. In 2016 China issued a white book it explains charter of its policies towards the Middle East. It has three aspects firstly, Middle East is regarded as main energy axis. Secondly, highlights to facilitating trades, infrastructure, and investments. Third aspect focuses more on technological fields like nuclear energy, space, and satellites. China is going to pursue these prospects by signing agreements and projects. China's liberal economic system is also a mouthwatering prospect of its economic allies. This makes China's economic clout against US military clout and their strategic conflict is quite possible in the future. This could also result in an escalation of tension and may also be the possibility of a slight cold war among these major powers in this region.

### *Opportunities for the Middle Eastern Countries*

Rise of China and other middle powers mean international system is becoming multi polar and new balance of power system is emerging. It would mitigate US restrictions and may ease US imposed sanctions particularly Iran and Syria. Countries capable of balancing their relations with both US and China will benefit from investment opportunities, increased trade and job opportunities from both camps. Multi-polarity will thwart lone major power's ability to monopolize the region.

President Biden's policy approach manifests US interests has declined in the region. It would endow China to influence regional states economically, politically, and address their security concerns. Beijing can be an alternative trading partner contributing to development plans, economic transformations, infrastructure rebuilding, progress of technological development, digitalization, and modernization. Peoples Republic of China can also increase its oil imports and enhance soft power in the region. Contrarily, Sino-US rivalry could stabilize the region. This would also ensure China is a strong regional influencer in fostering security.

### **CONCLUSION**

Although China is making advancements in different fields like economic, security, military and technology, etc. the US is still maintaining a strong position as a sole global power, and it's also clear that China is not capable enough to make changes in the global order, gaining superiority in the military, its deployment, influencing political, diplomatic cultural clouts and impacting international organizations. Many emerging powers are spinning in orbit so they cannot claim China to be prominent power.

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