

From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Shifting Power Dynamics in The Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East's geopolitical landscape has undergone a profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. In the early post–Cold War period, the United States emerged as the dominant global power. It played a decisive role in shaping political, military, and economic developments in the Middle East. The United States played a key role in shaping the regional security architecture through a combination of military interventions, strategic alliances, and sustained diplomatic engagement. However, developments over the past decade, including renewed great-power competition, regional conflicts, and shifting alliances, have significantly altered this structure. The growing engagement of Russia and China has intensified geopolitical dynamics in the region. At the same time, the increasing strategic autonomy of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel has further contributed to a more competitive geopolitical landscape. Recent crises such as the Israel– Hamas war that began in 2023 and tensions in the Red Sea highlight the increasing complexity of regional conflicts. Meanwhile, the escalating rivalry between Iran and Israel demonstrates how global and regional powers are interacting within an increasingly multipolar environment. This paper examines how the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity has reshaped power dynamics in the Middle East by analysing strategic competition, regional diplomacy, economic connectivity, and security crises. The study proceeds from the hypothesis that the increasing engagement of multiple actors has transformed the region from a U.S.-led order into a diversified and contested geopolitical system. While the United States remains influential, power is now distributed across several global and regional actors, producing new alignments, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic rivalries.

KEYWORDS: Middle East geopolitics, multipolarity, power transition, global order, regional security, international relations

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has historically been a central arena of global politics due to its strategic geography, energy resources, and geopolitical importance. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international system entered what scholars called the “unipolar moment,” during which the United States possessed unparalleled military and economic power (Krauthammer, 1991). In the Middle East, American influence was visible through extensive alliances, military bases, and diplomatic initiatives aimed at maintaining stability and securing energy supplies. This influence was reflected in strategic partnerships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. It was also evident in the establishment of major military facilities in Gulf countries, such as Qatar and Bahrain, which host key U.S. military commands and naval operations (Fawcett, 2019; Gause, 2010; Walt, 2018).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States strengthened partnerships with key regional allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Military operations such as the Gulf War reinforced the perception that Washington served as the primary guarantor of regional security (Fawcett, 2019). However, the geopolitical environment began to evolve during the twenty-first century as new powers expanded their influence and regional states pursued more autonomous foreign policies. Recent conflicts and diplomatic shifts suggest that the Middle East is increasingly characterised by multipolar competition rather than unilateral dominance. The rise of China, the strategic return of Russia, and the assertiveness of regional actors have collectively reshaped political and security dynamics. These developments reflect broader transformations in the international system, in which power is distributed among multiple centres rather than concentrated in a single hegemon (Acharya, 2014).

The Unipolar Moment and U.S. Dominance

During the immediate post-Cold War era, the United States enjoyed unprecedented global influence. Scholars such as Charles Krauthammer argued that the absence of a rival superpower allowed the United States to shape international institutions and regional security structures (Krauthammer, 1991). In the Middle East, this influence manifested through military deployments, defense agreements, and diplomatic mediation. A prominent example was the U.S.-led coalition during the Gulf War, when Washington organised a broad international alliance to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The success of this operation reinforced the perception that the United States had become the region's principal security provider (Fawcett, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2014). Following the war, the United States strengthened its defense partnerships with regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt, while maintaining military facilities and strategic deployments across the Persian Gulf to secure vital energy routes and deter potential conflicts (Gause, 2010; Walt, 2018). American diplomatic engagement was also evident in peace negotiations related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the Oslo Accords, which reflected Washington's central role in facilitating dialogue and shaping regional political processes (Fawcett, 2019). The United States maintained large military installations across the Gulf region and engaged in security partnerships with numerous states. Counterterrorism operations following the September 11 attacks further expanded American involvement in the region (Walt, 2018). However, prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan generated debates within the United States about the costs and effectiveness of extensive military engagement.

At the same time, regional actors began diversifying their foreign relations rather than relying solely on the United States. Many Middle Eastern states increasingly pursued economic and security cooperation with multiple global partners, which gradually contributed to the erosion of a strictly unipolar regional structure. For example, Saudi Arabia has expanded its relations with both China and Russia while still maintaining its long-standing strategic partnership with Washington. Cooperation between Riyadh and Beijing has grown substantially across energy trade, infrastructure development, and technology, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the same time, Saudi Arabia has coordinated oil production policies with Russia through the OPEC+ arrangement, reflecting a more flexible and pragmatic foreign policy orientation (Fulton, 2019; Fawcett, 2019).

A similar pattern can be observed in Turkey, which has pursued a more autonomous regional strategy while remaining a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Ankara has expanded cooperation with Russia in areas such as energy, defense, and regional diplomacy, particularly during the Syrian Civil War. This balancing strategy illustrates how regional powers increasingly engage multiple

global actors to advance their strategic interests (Trenin, 2016; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Together, these developments demonstrate that Middle Eastern states are adopting multi-vector foreign policies in response to shifting global power structures, thereby contributing to the emergence of a more complex and multipolar regional order.

Russia's Strategic Return

Russia demonstrated its growing influence in the Middle East by providing both military and diplomatic support to the Syrian government. This support became particularly visible during the Syrian Civil War. Russia provided airpower, military assistance, and diplomatic backing to the Syrian leadership. Through these actions, Moscow showed its ability to influence the outcome of regional conflicts. It also challenged the dominance of Western powers in shaping Middle Eastern security dynamics (Trenin, 2016). Russian airstrikes and coordination with Syrian ground troops played a significant role in recapturing key cities such as Aleppo from opposition groups, which significantly strengthened the position of the Syrian government (Allison, 2017; Trenin, 2016).

In addition to military operations, Russia also expanded its long-term strategic presence in the region by securing access to military facilities, including the naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base. These installations enhanced Moscow's ability to project power in the eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East (Gerges, 2017). Diplomatically, Russia positioned itself as a key broker in negotiations over the Syrian conflict by participating in and hosting peace initiatives such as the Astana peace process on Syria alongside Turkey and Iran. Russia expanded its regional influence and reasserted its role as a key actor in Middle Eastern geopolitics through coordinated military and diplomatic efforts (Fawcett, 2019; Trenin, 2016).

China's Expanding Economic and Diplomatic Role

Russia has expanded its role in the Middle East primarily through strategic and military engagement. China, on the other hand, has increased its presence mainly through economic cooperation and infrastructure development. China's rapid economic growth has significantly increased its demand for Middle Eastern energy resources, prompting deeper partnerships with major regional producers (Allison, 2017). For instance, Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of China's largest suppliers of crude oil, strengthening long-term energy ties between the two countries. Chinese firms have also invested in refining, petrochemical industries, and major infrastructure projects connected to the BRI (Rolland, 2019; Fulton, 2019). For instance, a major China–Saudi Arabia petrochemical and refinery complex in Panjin involves an investment of about 83.7 billion yuan (approximately 12.2 billion US dollars) and includes a refinery capable of processing 300,000 barrels of oil per day, along with large petrochemical production facilities¹. The project forms part of broader industrial and energy cooperation between Chinese companies and Middle Eastern partners. Similarly, the Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refining Company (YASREF) project is a joint venture between Saudi Aramco and China's Sinopec. It represents an investment of nearly \$ 10 billion. The project processes large volumes of crude oil into refined petroleum products and petrochemicals. Such projects demonstrate how Chinese firms are expanding their presence across energy infrastructure, refining, and petrochemical sectors while strengthening economic ties with Middle Eastern states under the BRI.

China has expanded cooperation with Iran through long-term economic and strategic agreements involving energy, transport infrastructure, and trade connectivity, reflecting Beijing's broader regional

strategy (Garlick, 2021). A notable example is the 25-year China–Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed in 2021, which reportedly includes large-scale Chinese investments in Iranian energy production, transport networks, and industrial development. The agreement aims to expand oil and gas cooperation while improving railways, ports, and digital infrastructure that connect Iran to wider Eurasian trade routes (Garlick, 2021; Rolland, 2019).

China has also increased investment in logistics and port infrastructure across the Gulf. In the United Arab Emirates, Chinese companies have invested in expanding container terminals and industrial zones at Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi, which has become a major hub for trade between Asia and the Middle East. Similarly, in Oman, Chinese firms have invested billions of dollars in developing the Duqm Port and Special Economic Zone, including industrial parks, logistics infrastructure, and energy projects intended to link Gulf markets with Asian supply chains (Rolland, 2019; Fulton, 2019).

These initiatives are closely linked to the BRI, a major component of China’s foreign economic policy that seeks to strengthen connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure development, trade corridors, and financial cooperation. Under this framework, Chinese companies have invested in ports, railways, telecommunications networks, and energy facilities across multiple Middle Eastern countries. Such projects have deepened economic interdependence between China and regional states while allowing Beijing to expand its influence primarily through trade and development rather than direct military engagement (Rolland, 2019; Fawcett, 2019).

China has also begun playing a more visible diplomatic role in the Middle East. A notable example was its role in mediating the 2023 agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran after years of rivalry. The talks were hosted in Beijing and resulted in both countries agreeing to reopen embassies and resume diplomatic engagement, marking one of China’s most significant diplomatic interventions in the region (Fulton, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023). China has also increased diplomatic engagement through multilateral forums and partnerships with Gulf states. For instance, Beijing has expanded cooperation with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council in areas such as trade, technology, and energy security. High-level summits between China and Arab leaders have emphasised economic development, infrastructure connectivity, and political dialogue, reinforcing China’s image as a constructive partner in regional affairs (Rolland, 2019; Fawcett, 2019).

Although China maintains a relatively limited military presence compared with the United States, its expanding economic partnerships, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic initiatives have significantly increased its political influence across the Middle East. Through these efforts, Beijing is gradually positioning itself as both an economic partner and a diplomatic actor in regional geopolitics.

Recent Regional Conflicts and Strategic Realignments

Recent crises have highlighted the emergence of a more multipolar Middle Eastern order. The war between Hamas and Israel that began in 2023 significantly reshaped regional politics and triggered diplomatic responses from several major powers. The United States provided strong political and military support to Israel, including military aid, naval deployments, and diplomatic backing in international forums. At the same time, Russia and China called for ceasefires and negotiations within the United Nations, highlighting differing approaches among major powers to managing the conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; UN Reports, 2023).

Tensions involving Iran and its regional partners have also intensified geopolitical rivalries. Groups aligned with Iran, including the Houthis in Yemen, carried out attacks on commercial vessels in the Red

Sea during 2023 and 2024. These incidents threatened one of the world's most important shipping routes and prompted international naval deployments led by the United States and supported by several European and regional states to protect maritime security (International Crisis Group, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). Such developments illustrate how regional conflicts increasingly involve multiple global actors rather than being shaped by a single dominant power.

At the same time, diplomatic initiatives have emerged alongside these conflicts. A notable example is the China-brokered 2023 agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore diplomatic relations after years of hostility. Negotiations hosted in Beijing reflected China's growing diplomatic role in the region and demonstrated how new actors are influencing regional diplomacy (Fulton, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023). Similarly, ongoing normalisation discussions between Israel and several Arab states illustrate attempts to stabilise the region through diplomacy despite continuing conflicts (Fawcett, 2019; CFR, 2024).

Together, these examples demonstrate that contemporary Middle Eastern politics is shaped by overlapping military confrontations, diplomatic negotiations, and economic partnerships involving multiple global and regional actors. This evolving pattern reflects the broader transition from a largely U.S.-dominated regional order toward a more complex multipolar system.

Regional Powers and Strategic Autonomy

Another important aspect of the evolving regional order is the increasing agency of Middle Eastern states themselves. Countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are pursuing more independent foreign policies in order to expand their regional influence and reduce reliance on external powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Fawcett, 2019). Rather than aligning exclusively with one global power, these states increasingly engage simultaneously with the United States, Russia, and China in areas such as energy cooperation, security partnerships, arms purchases, and infrastructure development. This strategy reflects a broader shift toward strategic autonomy within the Middle East.

TurkStream Pipeline and Geopolitical Balancing

TurkStream is a major natural gas pipeline connecting Russia and Turkey through the Black Sea. The project was proposed in 2014 after the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline and became operational in 2020. It is operated by Gazprom and plays an important role in regional energy politics. The pipeline consists of two parallel lines. The first supplies natural gas directly to Turkey, while the second transports Russian gas to Southeast European countries through Turkey. This infrastructure strengthens Turkey's position as an important energy transit hub between Asia and Europe. Strategically, TurkStream illustrates how regional states pursue diversified partnerships in a changing geopolitical environment. Despite being a member of NATO and maintaining security relations with the United States, Turkey has deepened its energy cooperation with Russia. For Moscow, the project helps maintain gas exports to Europe while bypassing traditional transit routes.

For example, Turkey has pursued a multidimensional foreign policy that combines cooperation and competition with different global powers. While remaining a member of NATO, Turkey has also strengthened relations with Russia, including purchasing the Russian S-400 missile defence system and coordinating with Moscow in the Syrian conflict (Gerges, 2017; Walt, 2018). At the same time, Turkey maintains economic ties with China through trade, infrastructure cooperation, and participation in projects

linked to the BRI. Turkey also continues to negotiate security arrangements with the United States within the framework of NATO, including discussions on defence cooperation, regional security, and military coordination. At the same time, Ankara has cooperated with Russia on issues such as conflict management in Syria and energy projects like the TurkStream pipeline. These overlapping relationships demonstrate how Turkey balances its relations with multiple global powers in order to maximise diplomatic leverage and strategic flexibility.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has diversified its international partnerships in recent years. Although historically aligned with the United States, Riyadh has expanded energy-sector cooperation with China and engaged diplomatically with Russia through oil production coordination within the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+). Saudi Arabia has also sought to reduce regional tensions, including diplomatic engagement with Iran in recent years, demonstrating a more autonomous regional strategy (Acharya, 2014; Fawcett, 2019). Iran provides another example of regional strategic autonomy. Facing sanctions and political pressure from Western countries, Iran has strengthened its partnerships with Russia and China. At the same time, Iran has expanded its regional influence. It has developed political and military networks in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. These networks often include allied political groups and armed organisations that support Iran's strategic interests in the region (Trenin, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2014). In Iraq, for example, Iran-backed militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah operate within broader militia coalitions and have received training and logistical support linked to Iran's external military networks. This strategy allows Iran to project influence beyond its borders while countering pressure from rival powers. These policies allow Iran to maintain influence despite external constraints and contribute to the broader redistribution of power in the region.

The United Arab Emirates has also adopted a pragmatic and diversified foreign policy aimed at strengthening its regional and global position. The UAE maintains strong security ties with the United States, hosting U.S. military forces at the Al Dhafra Air Base and cooperating closely on counterterrorism and regional security initiatives (Fawcett, 2019). At the same time, the UAE has significantly expanded its economic relations with China, which has become one of its largest trading partners. Chinese companies are also involved in infrastructure and port development projects in the United Arab Emirates. They are also engaged in port development. This reflects deepening economic cooperation linked to the BRI (Rolland, 2019). For example, China's COSCO Shipping has invested in and operates a major container terminal at Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi, which serves as an important logistics hub connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Chinese firms have also participated in industrial and infrastructure development within the Khalifa Industrial Zone in Abu Dhabi. They support manufacturing, trade, and transport networks. These activities are linked to Belt and Road connectivity.

Regional rivalries further shape political developments across the region. Competition for leadership, ideological differences, and security concerns influence alliances and conflicts. For instance, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been visible in the conflict in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia has led a military coalition supporting the Yemeni government, while Iran has been widely reported to provide political and military support to the Houthis (Fawcett, 2019). Similarly, Turkey has expanded its regional influence through military and political involvement in Syria, including operations such as Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Peace Spring, aimed at countering Kurdish armed groups and shaping the outcome of the Syrian conflict. Turkey has also supported the Government of National Accord in the Libyan civil war, demonstrating its ambition to play a larger role in regional politics. At the same time, security tensions involving Israel continue to influence regional stability. Recurrent conflicts between

Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and confrontations with Hezbollah in Lebanon highlight how unresolved disputes continue to shape alliances and geopolitical calculations in the Middle East.

These developments indicate that Middle Eastern geopolitics is no longer shaped by the dominance of a single external power. Instead, it reflects an evolving environment in which global power competition intersects with the ambitions and strategic calculations of regional actors.

Energy, Trade, and Strategic Geography

Energy resources remain a major factor in the Middle East's geopolitical importance. The region possesses some of the world's largest oil and natural gas reserves, particularly in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Because many economies depend heavily on Middle Eastern energy supplies, major powers, including the United States, China, and India, maintain strong political and security interests in the region's stability (Fawcett, 2019). For instance, China imports a significant share of its crude oil from the Gulf region and has expanded long-term energy partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE as part of its broader global economic strategy.

Strategic maritime routes further increase the region's geopolitical significance. The Strait of Hormuz, located between Iran and Oman, is one of the world's most important oil transit chokepoints, through which a large proportion of globally traded petroleum passes each day. Disruptions in this region, such as confrontations between Iran and Western powers or attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, can significantly influence global energy prices and destabilise international markets. Similarly, the Suez Canal in Egypt is a crucial link between Europe and Asia. The temporary blockage of the canal by the container ship *Ever Given* in 2021 highlighted the vulnerability of global trade routes and demonstrated how disruptions in the region can have worldwide economic consequences (Fawcett, 2019).

Economic interdependence has also intensified the Middle East's connections with global markets. Infrastructure initiatives and investment partnerships increasingly link the region with Asia, Europe, and Africa. For example, China has invested in ports, industrial zones, and logistics networks in the Gulf under the BRI. Projects such as the development of terminals at Khalifa Port in the UAE illustrate how external economic actors are integrating the Middle East into wider trade networks (Rolland, 2019). At the same time, Western and Asian companies continue to invest in energy infrastructure, shipping, and finance across the region.

Together, the strategic importance of energy resources, maritime trade routes, and expanding economic networks ensures that the Middle East remains a central arena of global geopolitical competition.

CONCLUSION

The geopolitics of the Middle East has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. After 1991, the region largely functioned under a U.S.-led unipolar order. The United States played a major role in regional security, diplomacy, and military affairs. Its alliances, military bases, and interventions shaped the region's political structure.

Over time, this dominance began to change. The international system gradually moved toward multipolarity. Russia re-emerged as an important strategic actor, especially through its role in the Syrian conflict. China expanded its influence mainly through trade, investment, and infrastructure projects. These developments diversified the sources of power in the Middle East. Regional powers have also become more active and independent. Countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel now pursue more flexible foreign policies. They cooperate with multiple global powers rather than

relying on a single partner. This strategy has increased their strategic autonomy. Recent conflicts highlight this changing environment. The Israel– Hamas war, tensions in the Red Sea, and the rivalry between Iran and Israel show how many actors are now involved in regional politics. Global and regional powers interact simultaneously in shaping outcomes. Energy resources, trade routes, and strategic geography continue to make the Middle East important in global politics. Major powers remain deeply interested in the region's stability. Infrastructure projects, economic partnerships, and security arrangements further strengthen these connections.

In conclusion, the Middle East is no longer dominated by a single power. The United States remains influential, but it now shares influence with other global and regional actors. The region is increasingly shaped by a multipolar geopolitical order. This has created a more complex system of cooperation, competition, and shifting alliances.

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¹<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230330-saudi-arabia-china-launch-joint-belt-and-road-refinery-venture/>