



## OPEN ACCESS

## EDITED BY

Sharyl Cross,  
St. Edward's University, United States

## REVIEWED BY

Heidi Lane,  
Naval War College, United States  
Paul Bolt,  
United States Air Force Academy,  
United States

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Yueting Zhao  
✉ yuetingzhao1202@outlook.com

RECEIVED 08 April 2025

ACCEPTED 29 May 2025

PUBLISHED 02 July 2025

## CITATION

Zhao Y (2025) Beyond power transition theory: explaining the absence of U.S.-China power shift in the Middle East.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1607870.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1607870

## COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Zhao. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# Beyond power transition theory: explaining the absence of U.S.-China power shift in the Middle East

Yueting Zhao\*

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, China

The paper examines the power dynamics between China and the United States in the Middle East, arguing that there is no power transition in the region. First, the balance of power between these two countries in the region remains unchanged despite the decreasing involvement of the United States and the growing presence of China. Second, major regional leaders are steadily increasing their presence and trying to govern the region by themselves. Third, satisfied with the existing governing framework in the Middle East at the dyadic level, China has no desire to augment its engagement and replace the U.S. in the region. The incongruity between China's ideological frameworks and its progressively assertive approach to foreign policy further hinders its potential to emerge as a regional leader.

## KEYWORDS

power transition, Middle East, Sino-U.S. relations, regional leadership, strategic satisfaction

## 1 Introduction

The idea of power transition posits that the emergence of a growing power will threaten the current hegemon's dominating position and increase the likelihood of war (Organski and Kugler, 1991). A key idea in power transition theory is "satisfaction," which refers to the extent to which a rising power accepts and supports the current international order (DiCicco and Levy, 1999; Tammen, 2000). When a rising power is dissatisfied and approaches parity with the dominant power, the risk of conflict increases significantly. Conversely, if the rising power is satisfied, it is less likely to challenge the status quo even as its capabilities grow. Satisfaction can be assessed at both the global level (toward the overall system) and the dyadic level (in specific bilateral relationships).

Power transition theory (PTT) is popularly used in exploring Sino-U.S. relations. There is a rising China, evidenced by rapid economic growth, military modernization, and its growing assertive actions, for instance, in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Despite the fact that China and the U.S. collaborate and are interdependent, China is already considered a strategic foe of the U.S., as seen by the United States' strategic emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region. The change in strategic emphasis originated from the Obama administration's proposal of the "Pivot to Asia." During the first Trump administration (2017–2021), although some of the predecessor's policies were not fully continued, the administration shifted its strategic focus to national security in the context of great power rivalry, particularly emphasizing competition with China. The first Trump administration characterized China as a "revisionist power" in its 2017 National Security Strategy. The Trump administration has labeled China as a "revisionist power." Following Biden's assumption of power, he continues to execute Obama's strategy of realigning toward the Asia-Pacific area. Scholars believe that the strategic rivalry between the United States and China is already prominent in Asia (Ikenberry, 2016). China is

posing a threat to the U.S.'s established institutional frameworks, its regional and global influence, and its dominant position around the world. It seems that a conflict regarding the power shift is upcoming.

Academics have varying perspectives on the current power dynamics between China and the United States. Some scholars believe that China has already obtained a substantial edge over the United States, as shown by its fast economic expansion and increasing regional influence (Jacques, 2012). On the other side, scholars hold the "American resilience" perspective. They argue that although it is true that the U.S. only holds a bit of an advantage over China given its impressive and recent achievements, the U.S. has enduring and overwhelming dominance over China (Beckley, 2018). From their perspective, the strategic rivalry between the two nations has not ended, and there is a possibility that it will escalate further on a regional and global scale. In terms of specific regions, scholars argue that the power shift between China and the United States has become particularly noticeable in Asia. Previous attention has been paid to East Asia (Christensen, 2006; Kang, 2007; Beeson, 2009). Kang (2017) and White (2017) believe that China has already gained significant influence in the East Asian region. Recently, more and more scholars have discovered the importance of the South China Sea in exploring U.S.-China power dynamics (Emmers, 2010; Scobell, 2018).

The Middle East provides fresh insights into the study of the power transition between China and the United States. The Middle East is one of the world's most important regions for countries seeking an edge because of its natural resources and complex geopolitical landscape. The Middle East, a region characterized by religious and cultural tensions as well as terrorism, also presents a chance for powerful states to showcase their capacity to mediate conflicts and uphold peace. Simultaneously, with regional organizations playing a limited role in development and stability, the Middle East relies heavily on informal alliances, bilateral agreements, and external mediation to resolve conflicts, gradually becoming an important venue for great power rivalries.

Present signals in the Middle East also showcase the possibility of a power transition in the region. U.S. Middle East policy was modified to lower the level of its strategic involvement in the region. This is evidenced by the massive withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the nuclear deal with Iran through multilateral approaches. China, on the other side, has become more prominent in the Middle East. The Belt and Road Initiatives has strengthened China's commercial relationships with Middle East countries. At the same time, it tries to play a leading role in conflict mediation in the region. China has consistently offered humanitarian aid to conflict-ridden regions in the Middle East. China's diplomatic mediation facilitated the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). Additionally, China recently hosted delegates from Hamas and Fatah in Beijing for talks, resulting in the 2024 Beijing Declaration, which aimed at Palestinian reconciliation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). These actions highlight the significant role that China plays in maintaining peace in the Middle East.

With the decline of America's influence and the increase in China's presence in the Middle East, it seems that China will become a potential leader in the region. However, China, on the other side, also showcases its inactive participation in the Middle East. From the mediation behavior of China in the region, it seems that China does not want to replace the U.S. in the Middle East. The mediation strategy

of China in the Middle East is defined as quasi-mediation. Scholars argue that China only participates but does not lead the mediation in the Middle East. China also prefers solving Middle East conflicts according to multilateralism without direct intervention. China's participation in mediation is also selective, based on its varying interests (Sun and Zoubir, 2018). Some researchers even question the utility of China's mediation in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Baghernia, 2024).

Why has China not sought to replace the leadership of the United States in the Middle East despite several signs of power transitions? The paper contends that despite a reduction in U.S. engagement and an increase in the Chinese stakes in the Middle East, there is no significant shift in the balance of power between the two in the region. Despite a shift in strategic focus, the United States maintains its dominant position in the Middle East and remains committed to protecting its interests in the region. Simultaneously, significant regional powers, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, are consistently augmenting their political, military, and diplomatic influence in the Middle East. Turkey has intensified its military operations in northern Syria and augmented its diplomatic involvement in regional conflicts; Saudi Arabia has assumed a prominent role in regional diplomacy and economic initiatives; and Iran persists in exerting influence through both state and non-state actors in various neighboring countries. These changes suggest that regional actors are trying to exercise more autonomy in managing their local concerns and shaping the broader geopolitics, thereby complicating the ability of any external power, including China, to establish undisputed leadership in the Middle East. As for China, satisfied with the existing governing framework in the Middle East at the dyadic level, it has no desire to augment its engagement and replace the U.S. in the region. At the same time, China is a necessary but not sufficient actor in the Middle East. China's economic and diplomatic presence is significant in the region, but its role should not be exaggerated. The incongruity between China's ideological frameworks and its progressively assertive approach to foreign policy further hinders its potential to emerge as a regional leader. Thus, there is no power transition between China and the United States in the Middle East.

The study is beneficial for enhancing the understanding of power transition theory by applying the Sino-U.S. relations in the Middle East as a case study. It gives weight to satisfaction but also challenges the traditional viewpoint that satisfaction is the sole determinant of conflicts and power transition between hegemony and rising power. It posits that the cause of conflict and power shifts is also determined by strategic culture and specific context. It helps to close the research gap on the U.S.-China rivalry since previous studies have mostly focused on the Asia Pacific. Through its empirical evidence and analyses of power in the Middle East, the paper also contributes to a better understanding of academic literature regarding geopolitical competition and strategic action in complex environments.

The paper first introduces three theoretical frameworks in explaining the Sino-U.S. power struggle in the region, followed by exploring how states in the Middle East navigate among great powers from a historical perspective. Then, the paper discusses the United States' enduring strategic interests in the Middle East, even as its methods of engagement evolve. Even though the U.S. continues to maintain a large military presence in the area, it also has increasingly gravitated away from being solely focused on military intervention to

placing a greater emphasis on diplomacy, economic partnerships, and institutional involvement. This strategic shift is not a contradiction but a subtle shift in the way the U.S. continues to wield influence in the region. Third, the article posits that there is an increasing number of regional powers in the Middle East who endeavor to independently address the regional challenges. Finally, the paper argues that China's satisfaction at the dyadic level, along with its necessary but insufficient actor characteristics and its traditional political philosophy, limit China's ability to become a leader in the Middle East.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Sino-U.S. rivalry in the Middle East can be explained by different theories. Power transition theory, neoliberalism, and constructivism offer different perspectives on the Sino-U.S. power struggle in the region. Power transition theory (PTT) provides a structural explanation for understanding conflict and cooperation in the international system. Unlike traditional balance of power theories that suggest an even distribution of power promotes stability, PTT posits that peace is more likely when there is a clear hierarchy with a dominant power. A key concept in power transition theory is "satisfaction." Satisfaction refers to the extent to which a state accepts and supports the existing international order or status quo. DiCicco and Levy (1999) refine this concept of satisfaction, pointing out that it can be assessed on global and dyadic scales. Tammen (2000) developed this theory further by assuming how power parity and satisfaction jointly influence the level of conflict. If a rising power is dissatisfied with the current order and its power achieves parity with the dominant power, then the risk of conflict increases significantly. Conversely, if a power is satisfied, even if it grows stronger, it is less likely to challenge the status quo. The power transition theory offers still ongoing debates. Critiques challenge the deterministic characteristic of power transition theory and argue that peaceful transitions are possible through peaceful diplomacy, international institutions, and economic interdependence (DiCicco, 2017). There has been criticism of the theory for the overemphasis on material capabilities that does not take into consideration soft power, norms, and institution frameworks that are important in reducing the tensions that occur in power shifts (Koch, 2021). Moreover, the operationalization of essential factors, including satisfaction and power measurement, is still debated. Heckman (2009) suggests enhanced indices, the modified CINC score, to more accurately reflect external power sources and enhance predictive precision. At the practical level, power transition theory remains a vital and evolving theoretical framework to explain the power struggle between China and the U.S. Similar to Organski, Allison (2017) explores U.S.-China relations under the "Thucydides Trap." Niebel (2020) suggests that the U.S.-China power competition supports the third stage of Organski's power transition theory. However, the critiques and ongoing debates surrounding PTT suggest that it should be integrated with other international relations theories to fully explain contemporary dynamics.

Constructivism represents a shift from materialist theories of international relations. Wendt (1992) posits that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces. Katzenstein (1998) highlights how cultural and institutional factors shape national security interests and policies.

Constructivism helps to explain why China is unwilling to take over the hegemon of the U.S. in the Middle East. The Chinese diplomatic posture in the Middle East is heavily marked by Confucian ideals, such as respect for others, no harm to others, and a spirit of harmony. The constructivist view can also be used to illustrate why China's diplomatic intercourse in the Middle East is based fundamentally on strategic considerations. China's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference can be seen as a tactic for China to construct itself as a developing country that values sovereignty and opposes external intervention, an alternative way of gaining international recognition. It is also helpful for China to construct an identity that resonates with Middle Eastern countries seeking to reduce dependence on traditional powers. This identity-centered approach explains why China, despite its growing economic and diplomatic capabilities, has not sought to supplant the United States as the dominant external player in the Middle East. Rather than confronting the U.S. directly for regional hegemony, China has sought to alternate itself as a partner that respects regional autonomy and makes mutual economic interests rather than a security role.

Neoliberal institutionalism helps to explain China's approach in the Middle East by stressing how institutions and economic interdependence mitigate anarchy and facilitate cooperation among rational and self-interested states. As Keohane (1984) argues, the ability of states to communicate and cooperate depends on human-constructed institutions, which vary historically and across issues, in nature and in strength. In the context of the China-U.S. power struggle in the Middle East, neoliberal institutionalism helps to explain China's preference for working within existing institutional frameworks while gradually expanding its influence through economic ties. China's approach emphasizes economic engagement through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), multilateral diplomacy, and institutional cooperation rather than military competition. The BRI is not merely an economic project but also represents a new stage in China's engagement with the region (Kamel, 2018). The BRI enabled the development of regional partnerships and economic growth (Wu, 2021), resulting in a dense network between China and Middle East states, representing an indirect way of power confrontation. This explains China's willingness to work within the American-dominated status quo while simultaneously strengthening its position through economic means and institutional engagement.

Power transition theory, constructivism, and neoliberal institutionalism offer valuable insights into Sino-U.S. dynamics in the Middle East. But they are different in explanatory power. Power transition theory explains the absence of direct conflict between China and the U.S. by emphasizing satisfaction and the current distribution of state capabilities. Constructivism provides a nuanced explanation for China's selective engagement in the region, highlighting how its diplomatic philosophy constrains its actions and ambitions. Theories of neoliberalism may shed some light on China's style of engagement through economy rather than military confrontation. This article contends that power transition theory is more enlightening when it includes structural, rational, and ideational dynamics that condition China's foreign strategy in the region. By incorporating these dimensions into PTT analysis, we can develop a more complete understanding of why China, despite its growing capabilities, has not sought to challenge U.S. leadership in the Middle East.

### 3 Historical context: power struggles in the Middle East

The Middle Eastern history of power struggles has contributed to the intricacy of the geopolitical field that the great powers have been operating on. At this time, China maintained only a small presence in Middle Eastern affairs. China began by prioritizing internal consolidation and addressing regional security issues across Asia. However, China did prepare for future diplomatic engagement in the Middle East by initiating diplomatic ties with Egypt in 1956 and other regional nations in subsequent years.

The post-Cold War Middle East initially seemed to affirm U.S. dominance, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which provided an opportunity for the United States to strengthen its perceived dominant position in the Middle East (Rabinovich, 2016). The United States maintains a military presence in the Middle East, with forces stationed in states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. The United States regularly participates in energy partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, where it is a major importer of oil. At the same time, the U.S. offers development assistance to the Middle East in areas like education, health care, and infrastructure improvement. In addition, the United States is actively involved in mediating Middle Eastern crises.

However, the assertion of unchallenged U.S. hegemony in the contemporary Middle East is increasingly contested. While the U.S. retains significant power capabilities, the region is more accurately characterized by an emerging multipolar order. Russia plays a notable role in this multipolar environment. Russia is likewise attempting to regain its influence in the Middle East. Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, has become more assertive. It tries to seek a role in the Middle East. From a PTT perspective, Russia's actions can be seen as those of a dissatisfied power seeking to revise aspects of the region distributional order and limit the unipolar tendencies of the U.S., thereby fostering a more multipolar influence rather than directly replacing U.S. leadership.

China is an increasingly significant player in the Middle East. China's active participation in the Middle East is mainly on the economic front. China has invested in a large number of energy exploration and infrastructure projects in the Middle East due to its high energy dependence on the region. The Middle East is also an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which serves to increase China's economic partnership with the countries in the Middle East where it has broad geopolitical and economic interests. Although China pursues a basic strategy of non-interference in internal affairs in its diplomacy, it actively uses its diplomatic tools in the Middle East to promote the resolution of conflicts in the region.

China has emerged as another rising power in the Middle East, and PTT appears to signal the beginning of a new competition for influence in the Middle East. For a power transition to be identified, PTT asserts that several signals must be present. These may involve China exceeding the economic, military, and diplomatic influence of the United States in the Middle East, effectively contesting U.S.-led institutional frameworks, and creating a dominant set of rules and norms that regional actors are increasingly following. Additionally, a transition should necessitate that China take on substantial security responsibilities presently held by the United States and exhibit both the capability and intent to project decisive military power to affect regional outcomes, moving beyond its current focus on economic and

selective diplomatic engagement. If China is dissatisfied and attempts to overthrow the existing U.S.-led order, the rivalry between the two sides is likely to escalate beyond trade and technological competition into a more direct geopolitical, and perhaps even military, confrontation. This study contends that a power transition between the United States and China in the Middle East is unlikely to transpire. The reason for this is not solely attributed to the enduring, though contested, powerful position of the U.S. in the region but also to China's contentment with the current status quo. Moreover, China's diplomatic policy is influenced by strategic culture, which hampers its ability to emerge as a leader in the Middle East.

### 4 U.S. engagement in the Middle East: evolving not withdrawing

The role and influence of the United States in the Middle East, even as it remains strategically significant to Washington, are characterized by evolving strategies and a shifting presence rather than an "unaltered" stasis. Although there has been a discernible trend over the past decade towards recalibrating U.S. military posture away from large-scale, prolonged ground interventions, the United States continues to require a significant and strategically deployed military presence in the region. This presence serves to enhance and broaden partnerships, safeguard national defense interests against persistent and emerging threats, including those from Iran and its affiliates, and combat terrorism. Furthermore, while the United States' involvement in the region has not shifted solely from direct military intervention, it has indeed increasingly sought to complement its hard power capabilities with diplomatic initiatives and other forms of influence, sometimes described as soft power. However, recent events since late 2023 and policy directions under the current Trump administration underscore that direct military engagement and deterrence remain critical components of U.S. strategy, especially in response to escalating regional conflict.

#### 4.1 A historical overview of U.S. Middle East policies

From a historical viewpoint, we can see the constant, yet adaptive, involvement of the U.S. in the Middle East. In the initial 10 years of the post-Cold War era, the United States achieved the peak of its power and reputation as the primarily external influential force in the Middle East. The Bush administration actively participated in the Gulf War, providing assistance to Kuwait in addressing Saddam Hussein's invasion and effectively removing Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The subsequent Middle East policy of the Bill Clinton administration prioritized achieving peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The United States has made substantial endeavors to facilitate negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

The events of 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the failure of the war on terror have put pressure on America's position in the Middle East during the George W. Bush administration. Barack Obama's presidency sought to recalibrate the United States from the policies of former President George W. Bush. Obama terminated protracted military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Simultaneously, the Obama administration engaged in negotiations



with Iran to establish a nuclear agreement (the JCPOA). The administration made efforts to alleviate tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, although this ended in failure.

The Trump administration (2017–2021) implemented a distinct strategic approach to the Middle East compared to the Obama administration. The United States withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal in May 2018 and implemented a “maximum pressure” campaign of sanctions against Iran in order to hinder its nuclear development and regional influences. The Trump administration demonstrated substantial support for Israel rather than actively promoting a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States acknowledged Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocated its embassy there.

The Biden administration initially prioritized the use of diplomatic tools in addressing Middle East concerns. The Biden administration expressed its intention to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Furthermore, it adopted a modest stance toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue and expressed its endorsement of resolving the problem through a two-state solution. In mediating the Yemen Conflict, the U.S. has, for a time, ceased its earlier support of offensive operations by the Saudi-led coalitions and is now actively seeking to resolve the crisis through diplomatic means. However, the escalation of the conflict in Gaza following the October 2023 Hamas attack has significantly impacted U.S. policy, leading to substantial U.S. support for Israel’s military operations. This support has included record levels of military aid and diplomatic backing, even as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has worsened, drawing international scrutiny and complicating U.S. efforts to promote regional stability.

Following Trump’s second term, his administration quickly prioritized the Middle East in its foreign policy. His first major international trip of this term, scheduled for May 2025, targets Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. This trip aims to secure large-scale investments in the U.S. and reemphasize a vision for a “proud, prosperous, and successful Middle East” based on cooperative relationships and commerce (Klein, 2025). The administration has also launched military strikes against the Houthis in Yemen (BBC News, 2025). This approach is nested within a broader foreign policy that includes unilateral economic nationalism, but in the Middle East, the focus remains on achieving quick diplomatic deals, securing economic benefits for the U.S., and managing complex security challenges like Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While successive U.S. administrations may differ in methods, their overarching goal often remains the preservation of U.S. interests and its presence as a great power in the region, implying a continued, albeit potentially differently manifested, U.S. engagement.

Since the Obama administration, it appeared for a period that the United States was seeking to progressively diminish its direct military engagement in the Middle East and had instead sought to exert influence in the region through the indirect means of training local forces and providing support to regional partners. The 2010 National Security Strategy mentioned that the U.S. was transitioning security to full Iraqi responsibility and would end the combat mission in Iraq by the end of August 2010. It would remove all of its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 (Obama, 2010). The 2022 National Security Report also stated that the United States would persist in bolstering the capabilities of its allies and partners to discourage and oppose Iran rather than pursuing direct deterrence (Biden, 2022). Simultaneously, the United States was

aiming to decrease its independent military operations in the Middle East and instead favor resolving issues through multilateral means, such as addressing the Iranian nuclear threat through the P5 + 1 framework.

## 4.2 Unchanging military presence

Although there is a decreased tendency of U.S. presence in the Middle East, it is unlikely that America will completely disengage from the region. Its military presence still persists. The Obama administration’s position towards the Iraq War is clearly shown. The administration mentioned that the United States will persist in actively engaging with the area as a whole in order to guarantee that their reduction of military presence in Iraq creates a chance to promote long-term security and sustainable progress for both Iraq and the wider Middle East. Under the Biden administration, the official document states that the United States will maintain a requisite American military presence in the Middle East to safeguard the interests of the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. military presence for anti-terrorism is constant. The U.S. has close military cooperation with Jordan against ISIS, with forces located at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base. In 2018, the United States earmarked \$143 million for the purpose of enhancing and expanding the Muwaffaq Salti Air Base.

The U.S.’s defense operations in the region still exist. Qatar is a key strategic defense partner of the United States, and in 2024, the two countries re-signed and renewed a 10-year defense cooperation agreement to further cement military ties (Bertrand and Natasha, 2024). Qatar is home to the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, known as Al Udeid Air Base. This base accommodates Headquarters Central Command, U.S. Air Force Central Command, and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing of the U.S. Air Force. There are more than 10,000 United States military personnel at Al-Udeid, and more than 100 aircraft operate from the base. At the same time, Qatar and the United States regularly participate in joint military exercises and drills to enhance coordination between the defense forces of the two states, including the June 2017 Joint Naval Exercise and the August 2017 Joint Air Force Exercise. The United States and Israel have always maintained a close security connection. In recent years, the U.S. has maintained its commitment to Israel, primarily for defense. The Dimona Radar Facility is an X-Band radar system designed to detect and identify potential ballistic missile threats emanating from Iran. The Mashabim Air Base houses 40 soldiers who serve in the missile defense mission (Vandiver, 2017; Gross, 2017). Following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack, the United States significantly intensified its military support for Israel. Since the October 7 Hamas massacre, the United States has committed more than \$22 billion to bolster military operations across Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria (The New Arab, 2024). Since the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the United States and Kuwait have maintained a Defense Cooperation Agreement. Since 2011, U.S. troops have been used to support Operation Spartan Shield, a mission to deter regional aggression and stabilize countries. The United States has approximately 5,000 personnel stationed in the UAE under a defense cooperation agreement. At Al Dhafra Air Base, 3,500 U.S. personnel were stationed in 2015, reaching more than 3,800 in 2016. Al Dhafra Air Base is the busiest U.S. military base in the world for reconnaissance flights. Jebel Ali Port is the busiest port of call for the U.S. Navy.

### 4.3 From hard power engagement to soft power engagement

In 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar, agreeing to a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces under certain conditions (Qazi, 2020). On August 30, 2021, U.S. forces completed the withdrawal of the last of their soldiers. On December 9, 2021, the U.S. combat mission in Iraq officially ended with 2,500 U.S. forces remaining, who will be involved in advising and aiding (Arraf, 2021). The withdrawal of soldiers from Afghanistan and Iraq indicates a notable change in U.S. military strategy. It indicates that the U.S. has transitioned away from deploying major ground forces for extended occupations like those observed during the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War.

The removal of troops from the Middle East may signal a change in the U.S. strategy or policy towards the Middle East by moving away from being dominant on the ground militarily to the more nuanced and strategic use of non-military means (soft as opposed to hard). In contrast to hard power, which forces somebody to do something, soft power entices or persuades others to do something in a friendly way, such as diplomacy and culture (Nye, 1990). From the Obama to the Biden administrations, the U.S. has used soft power mechanisms more frequently to accomplish strategic objectives in the Middle East. Three main initiatives are being used by the Obama administration to finish the responsible transition to end the Iraq War. One of them falls under the category of soft power, which suggests that the level of involvement of U.S. civilians in Iraq will intensify and expand. On the issue of the Arab-Israel conflict, the National Security Strategy also mentioned that the U.S. seeks a peaceful resolution of conflict and pursues regional initiatives with multilateral participation alongside bilateral negotiations (Obama, 2010). These indicate that the U.S. hopes to use political, diplomatic, and civilian efforts to solve the conflict in Iraq.

In the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, the priority actions are divided into political, economic, and military. Based on the necessary military presence to ensure security, the U.S. puts more focus on political and economic actions. In terms of politics, the official document shows that the U.S. will expand and forge new partnerships to ensure security and stability. The United States endeavors to sustain a durable strategic alliance with Iraq and aims to resolve the Syrian War in a manner that protects human rights. It also plays a role in facilitating a comprehensive peace agreement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additionally, it encourages gradual reform and counter violent ideologies. The U.S. decides to actively participate in the region's economic affairs. Economically, it facilitates economic modernization in countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the United States aims to serve as a catalyst by engaging in economic activities that promote open markets and societies (Trump, 2017).

The Biden administration's National Security Strategy 2022 suggests a change of military-centric Middle East policy to a new framework. The new framework has five principles:

*First, the United States will support and strengthen partnerships with countries that subscribe to the rules-based international order. Second, the United States will not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East's waterways... Third, even as the United States works to deter threats to regional stability, we will work to reduce tensions, de-escalate,*

*and end conflicts wherever possible through diplomacy. Fourth, the United States will promote regional integration by building political, economic, and security connections between and among U.S. partners. Fifth, the United States will always promote human rights and the values enshrined in the UN Charter (Biden, 2022)—* National Security Strategy 2022.

The new security framework in the Middle East, particularly the third principle, indicates that the United States will primarily utilize diplomacy to reduce tensions and conflicts in the region. Furthermore, these principles do not demonstrate a tendency to increase America's power but instead seek to preserve and protect the United States' existing influence in the region. Engaging in less confrontational actions is beneficial for establishing trust, demonstrating respect for sovereignty, and advancing common interests. Ultimately, this will lead to a bolstering of America's soft power and the acquisition of recognition from nations in the Middle East.

However, this emphasis on soft power, while potentially signaling a move away from large-scale ground deployments, does not necessarily indicate a complete abandonment of hard power but rather a rebalancing alongside increased utilization of soft power mechanisms. Recent U.S. and UK military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, which began in January 2024 and intensified under the Trump administration into March 2025, demonstrate a willingness to employ hard power to protect international shipping in the Red Sea and degrade Houthi capabilities (Henderson, 2024). Moreover, while these actions aim to deter further attacks and maintain regional stability, they also underscore the limitations of soft power alone in addressing complex security challenges.

## 5 The rise of local powers

In the Middle East, the shift of strategic focus by the U.S., in addition to constant conflict in the region, has led the major regional powers in the Middle East to realize the necessity of seeking to solve the regional conflicts by themselves. There are numerous emerging local powers, including Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, which are progressively demonstrating their influence and molding regional dynamics. This phenomenon reflects a growing multipolarity within the region, in which no external or local actor is able to unilaterally dominate. Regional powers are increasingly making their own security and politics. At the same time, the restoration of relationships and the propensity towards multilateral cooperation in the region offer the local Middle Eastern countries a chance to independently address regional challenges. Such trends are not only a response to the partial retrenchment of the United States but also a manifestation of local actors' agency in navigating the evolving landscape of great power rivalry, particularly between the U.S. and China. The study of rising local power significantly catches up with the increasing complexity of power transition in the Middle East. It creates a link between regional and global power relations. The emergence of new regional powers turns the Sino-U.S. power rivalry into a more complicated struggle in the Middle East because Middle Eastern countries are no longer mere playing fields for others but rather states with active agencies that can shape the direction of external engagement. It also becomes a competitor in the literature with China in terms of regional leadership, highlighting that the primary contest in the Middle East is not simply

a binary power transition between Washington and Beijing but a multifaceted process involving the assertion of local agency, the recalibration of external influence, and the emergence of new patterns of cooperation and rivalry at both regional and global levels.

## 5.1 The rising local powers

An increasing number of regional powers are gaining more influence in the region. They challenge the status quo that the Middle East is dominated by external powers. They are striving to enhance their independence in handling affairs related to the Middle East. Israel is a notable regional power, mostly because of its remarkable progress in technology and military capabilities. In 2015, Israel spent four-point 3% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on civilian research and development, the highest percentage in the world. Israel was also ranked the thirteenth most innovative country in the world in terms of the number of scientific and technical papers published per million citizens (OECD, 2022). Israel has the highest ratio of scientists and engineers in the world, with 140 scientists and engineers for every 10,000 employees (Jamrisko et al., 2019). In comparison, the United States and Japan have only 85 and 83 scientists and engineers, respectively (Llani, 2009). Militarily, Israel is the only nuclear-armed country in the Middle East. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has one of the highest defense budgets in the Middle East and is also ranked as one of the best-trained armies in the world. With its cutting-edge military hardware and equipment, Israel is prepared to handle regional crises. But even though Israel has a great deal of homegrown capabilities, its hands are still largely tied, for the moment at least, to those of the United States. That has certainly been the case during the Gaza war when Israel relied greatly on U.S. military aid and diplomatic support. At the same time, it is true that Israel has enhanced its diplomatic relations with Arab states, most notably through the Abraham Accords with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan (Federico-O'Murchú, 2020). These agreements have established formal diplomatic, economic, and security ties and have opened new channels for cooperation in security, technology, and economic development. These new relationships might allow Israel to autonomously define the regional order rather than acting within a framework still heavily influenced by external powers.

Turkey's economic strength, military capabilities, and diplomatic initiatives demonstrate how regional actors influence broader geopolitical realities. Turkey has become one of the influential players in the Middle East region through its active promotion of the "Turkish model" and its active involvement in the Middle East in dealing with regional issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian crisis. Economically, Turkey is the 11th largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity. Turkey was estimated by the World Bank to be responsible for 50% of the GDP of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Turkey also has close trade relations with Middle Eastern countries, and the share of Turkish exports to Middle Eastern economies rose from 9% in 2002 to 12.5%. In 2004, this share rose to 19%. In the same year, Turkey's joint exports to Syria and Iran exceeded those to the United States (Albarracín, 2012). In terms of military power, Turkey is often recognized as having one of the most capable armed forces in the region. Its substantial engagement in the Middle East issues is evident through its engagement in the Palestinian issue. Turkey's ambitious involvement in Middle Eastern affairs is clear

via its diplomatic and political support for the Palestinians (Ackerman, 2025). For example, in response to President Trump's public announcement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held a special meeting on December 13, 2017. At the Summit, Erdogan criticized Israel's policies and advocated for the acknowledgment of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 2017). Turkey's independent standing on regional issues reflects its increasing autonomy in dealing with regional issues. This also positions Turkey as a significant player in shaping global power dynamics. Most significantly, Turkey's profile in Syria has been an axis of its regional policy. Since 2017, it has exercised control over northern Syria, backing proxy rebel factions and conducting direct military interventions from the north, with the objectives of maintaining its national borders, curtailing Kurdish dominance, and influencing the post-Assad political landscape. Ankara has established administrative control in parts of northern Syria, introduced the Turkish lira, and appointed local officials, demonstrating a long-term commitment to projecting power in Syria (Bermudez, 2025).

Iran is a powerful regional nation that seeks to subvert U.S. hegemony in the area. Iran has developed relationships and alliances with governments and groups, such as the Syrian regime and Hezbollah in Lebanon, that are hostile to American interests or influence. Iran has heavily invested in the advancement of its military. Iran has conducted tests and launched a variety of ballistic missiles that can reach locations around the Middle East, such as U.S. military installations there, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Even though Saudi Arabia is one of the most important regional allies of the U.S., part of its influence exists outside of the U.S. interests. For instance, Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen in March 2015 was mainly driven by its own interests. While the United States devotes some efforts to combating Houthi rebels and restoring the Hadi government, its support is conditional, and it has become hesitant to support the Saudis in the face of mounting humanitarian concerns. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen is part of a larger regional agenda, which has the aim of limiting Iran's reach in the region. The case of Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen shows that Saudi Arabia is willing to take independent actions to protect national interests, even if it may not be supported by the U.S..

## 5.2 Normalization of relationships and the inclination of multilateral cooperation

Countries in the Middle East are making efforts to normalize their relations. There is a rapprochement between the Gulf states and Iran. In 2022, the UAE decided to restore full relations with Iran after a six-and-a-half-year freeze in relations. In March 2023, long-time rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran announced an agreement to restore relations after months of secret negotiations hosted in Oman and Iraq. Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE ended their three-and-a-half-year blockade of Qatar in 2021. The countries signed a declaration at the 41st summit of the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the Saudi Arabian city of Al Ula. Saudi Arabia was the first country to lift the ban, reopening its only land crossing with Qatar at Salwa Port for cross-border traffic. Israel has also established diplomatic relations with numerous Arab countries. In 2020, the Abraham Accords were established, whereby



Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE agreed to officially establish normal diplomatic ties with Israel. One of the objectives of the agreement is to facilitate the establishment of new direct security connections between Israel and the Arab world (Kaye and Vakil, 2024).

Meanwhile, Middle Eastern countries are increasingly demonstrating a willingness to set aside their divergences in order to address shared challenges and actively engage in diverse regional platforms. The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership has already been held twice. The conference brought together a range of former rivals, including GCC members Iran and Turkey, as well as Jordan and Egypt, to discuss the stabilization of Iraq. Bringing together members from the Palestinian Authority, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, and Jordan, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum was founded in 2020 with the goal of fostering frequent discussions about decarbonization and gas security.

The establishment of normalized relations and the expressed openness for multilateral collaborations among the nations in the region suggests Middle Eastern states have come to recognize the existence of one another and are open to talking and discussing their shared interests. Normalization of ties is the foundation for future Middle East cooperation in the framing of regional security and economic and social stability so that countries work together to face common challenges.

From the perspective of the theory of the transition of power, these developments mean that the region, traditionally an area dominated by external hegemony, has moved to the stage of the struggle and cooperation between the several regional hegemony. Power transition theory posits that the risk of conflict or instability rises when rising powers approach parity with established hegemony, especially if they are dissatisfied with the status quo. In the Middle East, the proliferation of assertive regional actors—Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—reflects the emergence of a contested regional hierarchy rather than a single dominant power. The normalization of relations and multilateral cooperation can be interpreted as attempts by these states to manage the uncertainties of transition, build new frameworks for regional order, and hedge against both external intervention and regional rivalry. However, the lack of a clear regional hegemon may also heighten the chances of instability and competition, as implied by the power transition theory. In other words, the emerging Middle Eastern order demonstrates a regional system of multipolarity where cooperation and competition interact dynamically and, above all, emphasizes the significance of local agency for the outcome of the region.

At the same time, the rise of local powers and their active pursuit of strategic autonomy have complicated the pattern of Sino-U.S. power transition in the region. While the U.S. remains the most influential external actor, China's economic and diplomatic presence is rapidly expanding, especially through infrastructure investment, trade, and mediation efforts. However, most Middle Eastern countries are wary of picking sides in the Sino-U.S. competition. Instead, they are only concerned about maximizing their own interests by playing off between various great powers and developing their own capability to fend for themselves in security terms. This multipolar regional structure not only dilutes the direct confrontation between the U.S. and China but also provides local actors with unprecedented room for maneuver, making the Middle East a key arena for both regional and global power transition in the coming decades.

## 6 China's satisfaction, thinking sets constrain and true intention

From the Chinese side, China is content with the institutional system led by the United States in the region. In practice, China's role in the area is essential, but it alone is not enough to address all the challenges. China's traditional foreign policy thinking sets also impose limitations on its actions. All of these factors impede China's capacity to emerge as a dominant force in the Middle East.

### 6.1 China's satisfaction at the dyadic scale

The power transition theory holds the view that the cause of conflict stems from the growing discontent of a rising power toward the established institutional framework. Satisfaction can be evaluated on two levels. At the global level, satisfaction encompasses the structural consequences of shifting power dynamics and the gratifying impact of economic prosperity. On a dyadic scale, satisfaction is influenced by factors such as territorial disputes, which can create a situation where states experience significant dissatisfaction (DiCicco and Levy, 1999; Chan, 2004; Danilovic and Clare, 2007; Sample, 2018). In other words, a state may be dissatisfied with the global system but be satisfied at the dyadic level. As for China in the Middle East, it does not encounter territorial disputes as it does in some other regions. Instead, China has been able to leverage the existing framework established by the United States in the Middle East to its advantage. Thus, China has no desire to change the status quo in the Middle East.

China benefits from the existing stable environment in the Middle East maintained by the U.S.. The Middle East has a significant economic role for China. According to Chinese Customs statistics, trade volume between China and the Middle East has almost quadrupled, rising from \$262.5 billion in 2017 to \$507.2 billion by 2022. The Middle East became China's most quickly increasing commercial partner in 2022, with a year-on-year gain of 27.1%, beating the European Union (five point 6%), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (15%), and the United States (three point 7%) (Aluf, 2024). The U.S.-dominated order also ensures regional security and stability that serves to protect the economic interests of China in the region. China is, therefore, satisfied with the relatively peaceful and stable environment established by the United States in the region, which is conducive to its continued economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries.

China's growing economic and strategic interests have prompted it to take incremental steps to protect its assets and citizens. For example, it was in Djibouti that China set up its first overseas naval base. That base enables anti-piracy, evacuation, and peacekeeping operations but also signals China's intent to safeguard its maritime routes and project limited power in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. The base reflects both China's reliance on stable sea lanes and its cautious adaptation to new security responsibilities. China's deepening ties with Iran further illustrate its pragmatic approach. China is Iran's largest trading partner and main oil customer, importing over \$140 billion of Iranian oil since 2021 despite U.S. sanctions. These ties help China secure energy supplies and maintain leverage in the region. This also demonstrates its willingness to challenge U.S. preferences when it serves its interests. Meanwhile, China's backing of Russia's stance in



Syria—Russians vetoing the Western's interference and power in the state—demonstrates China's preference for stability and non-interference, preferring instead to work with others to counterbalance Western influence without lashing itself to a military conflict. China's vulnerability has been laid bare by recent incidents in the Red Sea, including Houthi attacks on shipping. With most of China's Europe-bound cargo passing through the Red Sea, disruptions have increased costs and delivery times, underlining the importance of regional stability for China's global trade. These incidents highlight both the benefits and limitations of China's current approach: it depends on the U.S.-led order for security but is increasingly exposed to regional risks as its interests grow.

It would not be cost-effective for China to choose to compete with the United States for dominance in the Middle East. Chasing for regional dominance will only increase its costs and responsibility in the region. Competing for regional leadership would require China to spend a lot on competing with the United States on all fronts. Competing with a global hegemon like the U.S. also carries a high risk of failure, especially considering the existing disparity between China's military capabilities and those of the U.S.. At the same time, winning the competition for power would also entail greater responsibility as a leader, requiring China to spend more of its military, financial, and human resources on maintaining peace and stability in the region. All of this will increase China's costs in the Middle East. The existing system already provides a way for China to reap economic benefits. At the same time, China has managed to increase its regional reputation and global influence through alternative means such as Belt and Road construction and diplomacy. Therefore, China has no desire to squarely seek hegemony in the Middle East with the United States.

## 6.2 China as a necessary but limited actor in the Middle East

China is a vital but inadequate actor in the Middle East. Its presence in the region is necessary. Economically, China is a vital player, particularly in energy trade and infrastructure development. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have been a significant stimulant to economic activity in the region, generating about \$90 billion of associated investments as of 2019. China's diplomatic efforts to promote regional peace are highly noticeable. The recent event is China hosting Fatah delegations for reconciliation talks in Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). At the same time, China's close economic ties with the region give it more negotiating leverage in mediating the conflicts in the region. China's ongoing economic cooperation with Syria during the civil war greatly helped the Syrian government. Towards the end of the war, China increased assistance and investment, helping bring about an end to the Syrian Civil War.

A defining feature of China's engagement in the Middle East is its strong preference for bilateral relationships over multilateral alliances. This sort of bilateralism allows China to extract the maximum leverage and flexibility: it gives China the power to shape cooperation to the individual requirements and interests of each country. Through individually tailored partnerships with states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, China can also engage in cooperative pragmatic relations without getting caught in regional rivalries or security obligations. Among these, China's bilateral relationship with Iran is

particularly notable. Despite international sanctions and Iran's relative isolation from Western economies, China has maintained and even deepened its cooperation with Iran. The two countries elevated their ties to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2016 and, in 2021, signed a 25-year cooperation agreement covering energy, infrastructure, and security cooperation. This roadmap is believed to encompass political, economic, security, and cultural dimensions, with China expected to invest up to \$400 billion in Iran's oil, gas, petrochemical, transportation, and manufacturing sectors over the agreement's duration in exchange for a steady and discounted supply of Iranian oil (Chaziza, 2020). This long-lasting partnership illustrates how China's bilateral approach enables it to maintain peaceful and beneficial relations even with countries whose relationship with other major powers of the region is tumultuous. This approach also aligns with China's longstanding principle of non-interference, allowing it to maintain neutrality and focus on mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic engagement. Moreover, the lack of a regional cooperation framework within the Middle East and the hierarchical nature of China's "partnership diplomacy" make bilateral ties the most effective means for Beijing to advance its interests in the region (Sun, 2021).

China posits its economic engagement in the Middle East to be fundamentally different from interventionism. First, China says its investments have no political strings attached, in contrast with Western aid, which is often conditioned on governance reforms (South China Morning Post, 2022). Secondly, Beijing frames its economic engagement as "win-win co-operation" and not exploitation, one that focuses on mutual gains vis-à-vis infrastructure construction (CGTN, 2019). However, this non-interference approach faces growing contradictions as China's economic footprint expands. The BRI inevitably changes domestic politics in recipient countries. China's recent moves toward utilizing extraterritorial jurisdiction as leverage suggest that the BRI will have political impacts alongside economic ones, challenging the neat separation between economic engagement and political influence that underlies China's non-interference narrative.

However, the significance of China's presence in the Middle East should not be exaggerated. The public discourse attributes the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia to China's involvement. Nevertheless, the real reason for China's success in serving as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the mutual willingness of both countries to participate in efforts at reconciliation (Baghernia, 2024). For Saudi Arabia, the achievement of Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to accelerate economic development and enhance national well-being, necessitates the establishment of a stable social environment. Globally speaking, the conflict in Yemen has incurred significant costs for Saudi Arabia while yielding limited advantages. For Iran, anti-government protests have caused economic stagnation and inflation within the country. The United States-led economic sanctions against Iran have made the country's economic status much worse. Therefore, both sides are in dire need of easing tensions with each other. Despite China's non-participation, the mediation may still have achieved success.

## 6.3 China's diplomatic philosophy: self-imposed constraints

China's limited participation in the Middle East is mainly due to the tension between its conventional diplomatic thinking—such

as non-interference and a focus on economic engagement—its current aspiration to play a greater international role and the realities of its expanding national interests. This inconsistency makes it difficult for China to take on a more prominent or leading position in the region.

China's foreign policy philosophy stems from the Confucian principles that underpin Asia. The influence of Confucianism is evident in China's diplomatic approach, which is characterized by principles such as non-intervention, keeping a low profile, and not taking the lead. The aforementioned diplomatic principles prioritize the values of sovereignty, modesty, and stability promotion, prompting China to exercise prudence and caution. Although these thinking sets have influenced China's diplomatic discourse and soft power, it is crucial to emphasize that pragmatic national interests dictate most of China's actual foreign policy choices. Under Xi Jinping, there has been a notable shift toward a more assertive and proactive foreign policy, moving beyond traditional restraint. As China rises rapidly, the adaptability of the thinking sets as a means for China to engage in global affairs diminishes. Disagreements have emerged on the necessity for China's foreign policy to adhere to conventional approaches. This bias between perception and practice challenges China to act as a mediator. The bias at the cognitive and practical levels is characterized by a conflict between China's diplomatic strategy and its expanding national interests worldwide, as well as China's diplomatic strategy and its growing willingness to make a difference. These contradictions restrict China's actions, leading to a decline in problem-solving efficacy.

The policy of non-interference of China means that it does not get involved in other countries' internal issues. At the same time, keeping a low profile and not taking the lead show that China is less willing to lead conflict resolutions at the international level. However, since Xi Jinping came to power, there has existed a strong willingness to make the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation happen. This objective is conditional on China's behavior in the international arena. In order to accomplish this, the nation must actively participate in global affairs and strive to establish China's position as a prominent force that promotes peace at both regional and global levels. China's conventional foreign policy thinking sets face challenges due to the growing desire to make a difference. In order to solve these contradictions, China has to readjust its diplomatic tactics, mediating between non-interference and intervention. As a result, China's interventions are limited to the superficial level. Take China's mediation in the Middle East as an example. At the superficial level, China's mediation attempts always involve appeals and initiatives. These actions can potentially enhance China's reputation as a responsible global power, but their effectiveness in mediating conflicts is limited. In mediating the Israel and Palestine conflicts, China has proposed several slogans and initiatives. During two meetings with visiting President Abbas in May 2013 and July 2017, President Xi gave a "four-point proposal" for settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2018, Wang Qishan, the PRC's Vice President, paid separate trips to Palestine and Israel, reaffirming China's support for the "two-state solution." China has consistently put forth various solutions and initiatives to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Due to its policy of non-interference, China has refrained from directly intervening in the mediation process. Consequently, its mediation endeavors have yet to result in a significant qualitative transformation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

At the same time, as China's international influence is rapidly expanding, its national interests are also expanding worldwide. China is becoming more reliant on a stable and peaceful regional and global environment to protect its interests. Participation in the Middle East has also become necessary for China to safeguard its interests on regional and global scales. However, protecting national interests requires China to engage in international conflicts, which contradicts the non-interference policy to some extent. To balance this contradiction, China only engages in issues in the region that are related to its core interests. China has strategically chosen to participate in conflict mediation efforts in the Middle East based on its varying levels of interest. Iran is China's third-largest trading partner in the Middle East. China is Iran's most significant commercial partner, its major export market for petroleum and non-petroleum products, and its main source of foreign investment. China's close economic links with Iran enable it to actively participate in mediation and strongly support resolving the Iranian nuclear problem through communication and negotiation within the P5 + 1 framework. Conversely, China is less involved in issues that are not as important to its interests, such as the Lebanese issue, the Yemeni sectarian strife, and the Iranian-UAE island dispute. Selective involvement in mediation prevents China from gaining an in-depth understanding of the full scope of the conflict. A conflict between ethnic groups or any two countries can be attributed to broad historical and cultural contexts. Hence, concentrating solely on countries and regions that impact China's interests is an inadequate resolution to the Middle East issues.

## 7 Conclusion

The paper clarifies why and how there is no great power competition in the Middle East under the shadow of China's rise. First, from the perspective of the United States, it asserts that there is a consistent and enduring American presence in the region. From a historical and current perspective, the United States has not completely withdrawn its military presence from the region. The U.S.'s consistent military presence can be seen through its efforts to fight terrorism and protect its own interests in the area. At the same time, the U.S. has shifted from a military to a more sustainable and influential soft power presence. Second, there are growing regional powers such as Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia that are willing to solve the regional issues without the interference of external actors. Third, China is content with the framework established by the U.S. in the region and has no intention of altering the current situation. China plays a crucial role in promoting peace and fostering development in the region. However, China's engagement as a leader in the region is constrained by its traditional thinking sets.

From the perspective of power transition theory, the results in this paper, therefore, add important nuance to our understanding of great power competition. Classic power transition theory posits that when a dissatisfied rising power approaches parity with the dominant power, the risk of confrontation and even war increases significantly (Organski and Kugler, 1991; DiCicco and Levy, 1999). However, the Middle East case demonstrates that a power transition does not always lead to direct rivalry or conflict. In this region, the United States remains

the preeminent power, while China, despite its growing economic and diplomatic presence, remains largely satisfied with the existing order and does not seek to challenge U.S. dominance. Furthermore, the participation of independent regional actors like Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia complicates the established power transition dichotomy. These local powers are increasingly capable and willing to manage regional affairs independently, creating a more multipolar environment that diffuses the potential for a direct Sino-American power struggle. This highlights that regional hierarchies and the agency of local actors can mediate or even prevent the escalation predicted by power transition theory in its classic form. Therefore, this paper suggests that the explanatory power of power transition theory is enhanced when it takes into account not only the satisfaction of the rising power with the status quo but also the role of regional actors and the specific context of the region in question.

Limitations of this study should be considered. The study focuses on the perspectives and behaviors of the U.S. and China in the Middle East. It may overlook other actors' roles in the region, such as the influence of states like Russia and the EU and non-state actors like terrorist organizations and regional alliances. Future research can improve the study by investigating various regional and international actors in the region.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

YZ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## References

- Ackerman, D. (2025). Hamas and Turkey: Partners in terror, *FDD*. Available online at: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/03/28/hamas-and-turkey-partners-in-terror/> (Accessed April 12, 2025).
- Albarracín, J. (2012). *The role of Turkey in the New Middle Eastern economic architecture*.
- Allison, G. T. (2017). Destined for war? *Natl. Inter.* 149, 9–21. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557386>
- Aluf, D. (2024). 'China's influence in the Middle East and its limitations', *The Diplomat* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/chinas-influence-in-the-middle-east-and-its-limitations/>
- Arraf, J. (2021). U.S. announces end to combat in Iraq, but troops will not leave. *The New York Times*:A9–L. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/26/world/middleeast/us-iraq-troop-withdrawal.html> (Accessed June 5, 2025).
- Baghernia, N. (2024). China's marginal involvement in the 2023 Iran Saudi Arabia reconciliation. *Asian Aff.* 55, 34–51. doi: 10.1080/03068374.2024.2329615
- Beckley, M. (2018). Unrivaled: Why America will remain the world's sole superpower. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Beeson, M. (2009). Hegemonic transition in East Asia? The dynamics of Chinese and American power. *Rev. Int. Stud.* 35, 95–112. doi: 10.1017/S0260210509008341
- Bermudez, K. (2025). '10 things to know about Turkey's interventions and influence in Syria', *FDD*, 24 February. Available online at: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/02/24/10-things-to-know-about-turkeys-interventions-and-influence-in-syria/> (Accessed May 13, 2025).
- Bertrand, A. M., and Natasha, M. (2024). U.S. quietly reaches agreement with Qatar to keep operating largest military base in Middle East | CNN politics, *CNN*. Available online at: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/02/politics/us-qatar-agreement-largest-base-middle-east/index.html> (Accessed May 11, 2024).
- Biden, J. R. (2022). Biden-Harris white house national security strategy, October 2022. *Collections* 2022, 10–12. Available online: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>
- CGTN. (2019). China eyes win-win cooperation with the Middle East. Available online at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d35516a4d32457a6333566d54/index.html> (Accessed May 14, 2025).
- Chan, S. (2004). Can't get no satisfaction? The recognition of revisionist states. *Int. Relat. Asia-Pac.* 4, 207–238. doi: 10.1093/irap/4.2.207
- Chaziza, M. (2020). 'China and Iran reach a new stage in their strategic partnership', BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Perspectives Paper [Preprint].
- Christensen, T. J. (2006). Fostering stability or creating a monster? The rise of China and U.S. policy toward East Asia. *Int. Secur.* 31, 81–126. doi: 10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.81
- Danilovic, V., and Clare, J. (2007). Global power transitions and regional interests. *Int. Interact.* 33, 289–304. doi: 10.1080/03050620701451138
- DiCicco, J. M. (2017). "Power transition theory and the essence of revisionism" in *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. USA: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.311

## Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. This research was financially supported by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen.

## Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and the invaluable guidance received from teachers throughout the author's educational journey.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

The author declares that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.



- DiCicco, J. M., and Levy, J. S. (1999). Power shifts and problem shifts: the evolution of the power transition research program. *J. Confl. Resolut.* 43, 675–704. doi: 10.1177/0022002799043006001
- Emmers, R. (2010). The changing power distribution in the South China Sea: implications for conflict management and avoidance. *Pol. Sci.* 62, 118–131. doi: 10.1177/0032318710381519
- Federico-O'Murchú, S. (2020). 'Joint statement of the United States, the State of Israel, and the United Arab Emirates', CNN. Available online at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/13/middleeast/mideast-trump-full-statement-uaeisrael-intl/index.html> (Accessed April 24, 2024).
- Gross, J. A. (2017). *Contradicting IDF, U.S. says it didn't establish military base in Israel*. Available online at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/contradicting-idf-us-says-it-didnt-establish-military-base-in-israel/> (Accessed May 2, 2024).
- Heckman, G. A. (2009). *Power capabilities and similarity of interests: A test of the power transition theory*. Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College.
- Henderson, C. (2024). U.S. and UK military strikes in Yemen and the jus ad bellum. *Int. Comp. Law Q.* 73, 767–792. doi: 10.1017/S0020589324000216
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2016). Between the eagle and the dragon: America, China, and middle state strategies in East Asia. *Polit. Sci. Q.* 131, 9–43. doi: 10.1002/polq.12430
- Jacques, M. (2012). *When China rules the world: The rise of the middle kingdom and the end of the western world* [greatly updated and expanded]. Penguin UK.
- Jamrisko, M., Miller, L. J., and Lu, W. (2019). *These are the world's most innovative countries*. New York: Bloomberg, 22.
- Kamel, M. S. (2018). China's belt and road initiative: implications for the Middle East. *Camb. Rev. Int. Aff.* 31, 76–95. doi: 10.1080/09557571.2018.1480592
- Kang, D. C. (2007). *China rising: Peace, power, and order in East Asia*. New York City: Columbia University Press.
- Kang, D. C. (2017). *American grand strategy and East Asian security in the twenty-first century*. 1st Edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katzenstein, P. J. (1998). *Cultural norms and national security: Police and military in postwar Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kaye, D. D., and Vakili, S. (2024). Only the Middle East can fix the Middle East: the path to a post-American regional order. *Foreign Aff.* 103:32. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/fix-middle-east-united-states>
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Klein, B. (2025). Trump is Middle East-bound for his first major international trip of his second term – here's what to watch | CNN Politics, CNN. Available online at: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/12/politics/trump-middle-east-what-to-watch> (Accessed May 12, 2025).
- Koch, C. J. (2021). Testing the power transition theory with relative military power. *J. Strateg. Secur.* 14, 86–111. doi: 10.5038/1944-0472.14.3.1884
- Llani, O. (2009). Israel ranks fourth in the world in scientific activity, study finds: Israel's role in global scientific activity is 10 times larger than its percentage of the world's population. Haaretz [Online] November 17th.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024a). Wang Yi: the facilitation of the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran sets a new example of political settlement of hotspot issues. Available online at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240319\\_11262331.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240319_11262331.html) (Accessed April 12, 2025).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024b). 'Palestinian Factions Sign "Beijing Declaration on Ending Division and Strengthening Palestinian National Unity" in Beijing'. Available online at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202407/t20240723\\_11458692.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202407/t20240723_11458692.shtml) (Accessed April 12, 2025).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey. (2017). 'Final communiqué of the extraordinary Islamic summit conference to consider the situation in wake of U.S. administration's recognition of the city of al-Quds ash-sharif as the so-called capital of Israel, the occupying power, and transfer of the U.S. embassy to al-Quds'. Available online at: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/final-communique-of-the-extraordinary-islamic-summit-conference-to-consider-the-situation-in-wake-of-us-administrations-recognition-of-the-city-of-al-quds-ash-sharif-as.en.mfa> (Accessed April 12, 2025).
- News, M. C. (2025). U.S. launches wave of air strikes on Yemen's Houthis, BBC News. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c05mvr3j3yro> (Accessed May 12, 2025).
- Niebel, D. (2020). The power transition theory and the Sino-American contention for power. *Towson Univ. J. Int. Aff.* 64, 1–17. Available at: <https://wp.towson.edu/iajournal/spring-2021-article-1/>
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy* 153:153. doi: 10.2307/1148580
- Obama, B. (2010). *National security strategy of the United States* (2010). Darby, Pennsylvania, USA: Diane Publishing.
- OECD. (2022). Gross domestic spending on R&D. Available online at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.html> (Accessed April 7, 2025).
- Organski, A. F. K., and Kugler, J. (1991). *The war ledger*. Nachdr. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Qazi, S. (2020). 'Afghanistan's Taliban, U.S. sign agreement aimed at ending war', *Al Jazeera*, 12.
- Rabinovich, I. (2016). 'The Russian-U.S. relationship in the Middle East: a five-year projection'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.
- Sample, S. G. (2018). Power, wealth, and satisfaction: when do power transitions lead to conflict? *J. Confl. Resolut.* 62, 1905–1931. doi: 10.1177/0022002717707238
- Scobell, A. (2018). The South China Sea and U.S.-China rivalry. *Polit. Sci. Q.* 133, 199–224. doi: 10.1002/polq.12772
- South China Morning Post. (2022). 'China's 'no strings attached' approach to the Middle East may work better than U.S. ethos of liberation', *South China Morning Post*. Available online at: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3177142/chinas-no-strings-attached-approach-middle-east-may-work-better-us> (Accessed May 14, 2025).
- Sun, D. (2021). "China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East" in *Routledge handbook on China–Middle East relations*. ed. J. Fulton (London: Routledge), 299–311.
- Sun, D., and Zoubir, Y. (2018). China's participation in conflict resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: a case of quasi-mediation diplomacy? *J. Contemp. China* 27, 224–243. doi: 10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019
- Tammen, R. L. (Ed.) (2000). *Power transitions: Strategies for the 21st century*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- The New Arab. (2024). 'U.S. spent over \$22 billion in weapons for Israel since Gaza war'. Available online at: <https://www.newarab.com/news/us-spent-over-22-billion-weapons-israel-gaza-war> (Accessed May 12, 2025).
- Trump, P. D. J. (2017). 'President Donald J. Trump announces a national security strategy to advance America's interests'.
- Vandiver, J. (2017). 'U.S. troops deployed to Israel get a new barracks', *Stars and Stripes*.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics. *Int. Organ.* 46, 391–425. doi: 10.1017/S0020818300027764
- White, H. (2017). *Quarterly essay 68 without America: Australia in the new Asia*. Q. Essay.
- Wu, B. (2021). China and new Middle East. *J. Balkan Near Eastern Stud.* 23, 443–457. doi: 10.1080/19448953.2021.1888248