

Great Power Strategies: Offensive Dominance and Threat-Reduction Wedging in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the escalating polarization of the international system shapes great power competition in the Middle East and influences regional outcomes. It argues that the U.S. hegemonic position in the region and its superior power projection, reinforced by regional factors such as established alliance systems and U.S. clients' reliance on Washington for internal and external security, enable the United States to pursue an offensive dominance strategy aimed at establishing a regional order to contain China and Russia. Through this strategy, Washington seeks to transform its alliances with client regimes into a competitive alliance against Beijing's and Moscow's influence, while these regimes' high dependence on U.S. protection often compels compliance with U.S. global interests even when such compliance conflicts with their national interests. However, global systemic constraints, including China's and Russia's non-regional hegemonic status and their limited power projection relative to the United States, prevent them from pursuing similar offensive strategies. Traditional wedge approaches are insufficient, given the high dependence of U.S. regional clients on U.S. protection. In response, Beijing and Moscow are employing a novel form of threat-reduction wedging designed to lower clients' threat perceptions, facilitate conflict resolution, and foster a more independent regional order. This strategy seeks to rebalance U.S. alliances and their ability to cooperate with China and Russia. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement illustrates the potential of threat-reduction wedging, while the Israeli case highlights its limits. Overall, the effectiveness of China's and Russia's strategy remains extremely constrained relative to that of the United States.

KEYWORDS

Middle East, great powers, offensive dominance, threat-reduction wedging strategy

Introduction

The literature on regional subsystems¹ asserts that global politics is not a monolithic entity, but consists of an interlinked dominant system and regional subsystems. The dominant system is a closed system in which only great powers operate, while regional subsystems are constructed through complex interactions among two or more proximate states in a limited space, where both external and internal players recognize the unique nature of these interactions. While the dominant system is restricted to great powers, regional subsystems are not confined solely to regional states, as external great powers can penetrate regions and influence regional politics.

The regional subsystem literature holds that, to analyze regional politics effectively, it is necessary to study three levels: domestic politics within regional states, interactions among regional states, and the global level, specifically the policies of external great powers within the region.² When it comes to interaction and as demonstrated by B. Tibi in his work on delineating the Middle Eastern subsystem, there are four categories that define interactions, shaping the regional subsystem: conflict (verbal and non-verbal), political considerations (both negative and positive), participation (negotiations between governments, state treaties, and various forms of exchange, such as trade), and aid.³

This article examines how the current polarization of the global system shapes great power strategies within the Middle Eastern regional subsystem and influences, but does not determine regional outcomes. The first section analyzes how the structural features of the Middle East subsystem condition great power penetration. The second section compares the strategies of the United States, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other, in response to intensified global polarization. It argues that the United States pursues an offensive dominance strategy to establish a regional order under its dominance for its global strategy to contain China and the resurgence of Russian influence. It does so to reorient its alliances with regional clients toward a more competitive posture *vis-à-vis* Beijing and Moscow, reflecting the high dependence of Middle Eastern clients on U.S. security guarantees. China and Russia pursue a novel form of threat-reduction wedging, aiming to foster an independent regional order in order to reduce the dependence of U.S. allies on Washington, limiting U.S. leverage over its regional clients.

The study then examines the implications for the Saudi-Iranian relationship, showing how shifts in great power engagement (particularly China's mediating role) have contributed to recent diplomatic breakthroughs, illustrating the potential for global polarization to foster regional realignment and reduce U.S. influence on a regional client. The final section discusses the limitations of threat-reduction wedging and highlights its regional implications, especially for Chinese and Russian efforts to diminish U.S. influence.

1 Brecher 1963; Binder 1958; Cantori, Spiegel 1969; Cantori, Spiegel 1970; Väyrynen 1984; Thompson 1973; Young 1968.

2 Thompson 1973.

3 Tibi 1998, 48–49.

The Subordination of the Middle Eastern Regional Subsystem

B. Miller¹ explored the impact of great powers interventions on the autonomy of regional subsystems. He argued that competition among great powers bolsters the bargaining power of regional states, allowing them to exploit this rivalry to expand their foreign policy maneuvering room. Conversely, great power cooperation tends to constrain, if not eliminate, this autonomy, rendering regional states largely reliant on the interests and policies of dominant external actors. Ultimately, B. Miller concluded that shifts in the international system, particularly the structure of great power relations, significantly affect the autonomy of regional subsystems, implicitly suggesting that subordination (a dependency arising from systemic changes at the global level) is an inherent characteristic.

However, his analysis arguably underemphasized the influence of a regional subsystem's specific attributes on the great power(s) abilities to influence regional outcomes. As studies on regional politics indicate,² regional subsystems differ considerably in their cohesion, the nature of interactions among regional states (cooperative or competitive), regional power distribution, and overall regional power capabilities. These inter-regional variations profoundly shape great powers' strategies and strongly influence their effectiveness in achieving desired regional outcomes.³ As W. Thompson⁴ astutely noted, the assumption of inherent subordination warrants careful examination for each subsystem across different periods.

This caution is particularly pertinent when analyzing the Middle Eastern regional subsystem. The absence of strong "regionalism" defined by F. Söderbaum⁵ as the ideas and identities underpinning a regional project, distinct from "regionalization" (the process of regional interactions), creates a unique dynamic. Unlike Europe, the Middle East has not fostered a cohesive regional project, a conclusion supported by studies highlighting the "absence of regionalism"⁶ or its existence as a "mirage,"⁷ alongside substantial regionalization but weakly institutionalized regionalism.⁸ The lack of robust regionalism and a stable regional order impedes strong cooperation and predictable interactions governed by regional institutions.⁹ As J. Sullivan and D. Benaim argue, this makes the Middle East the "most dangerously underinstitutionalized region."¹⁰

Middle Eastern regimes often operate as clients – they turn heavily reliant on external support for their security and survival. The inherent lack of capacity, amid the Middle Eastern states minor power status, to ensure their own security¹¹ leads to a significant dependence on the assistance of great powers, considerably constraining their autonomy based on the preferences of these external actors.¹²

1 Miller 1995.

2 Lake, Morgan 1997; Buzan, Waever 2003; Cantori, Spiegel 1969; Cantori, Spiegel 1970; Väyrynen 1984; Thompson 1973.

3 Monteiro 2014; Hubel et al. 2001; Miller 2001; Miller, Kagan 1997; Lake, Morgan 1997; Buzan, Waever 2003; Cantori, Spiegel 1970, 1969; Väyrynen 1984; Thompson 1973.

4 Thompson 1973.

5 Söderbaum 2003, 7.

6 Aarts 1999.

7 Del Sarto, Soler i Lecha 2018.

8 Valbjørn 2016.

9 Mearshimer 2019.

10 Cited in Parsi 2021, 8.

11 Alford 1984; Rothstein 1968.

12 Morrow 1991.

Their dependence on great powers is higher, because of the high level of threat, amid the absence of a Middle Eastern regional order under which regimes operate.¹ The absence of a dominant local great power capable of deterring external intervention creates a power vacuum, potentially inviting offensive dominance strategies from unconstrained external actors.²

During periods of great power cooperation or the ascendancy of a single external great power, these client regimes experience heightened dependency. Conversely, rivals, local regional powers without the backing of another external great power, encounter greater hostility. During eras of great power rivalry, particularly systemic polarization, Middle Eastern regimes may adopt a multi-vector foreign policy,³ strategically leveraging external competition to extract concessions and enhance their strategic autonomy.

The confluence of high dependence rooted in the high level of threat under which the Middle Eastern regimes operate, amid the absence of a Middle Eastern order and the minor power status of regional states, ensures that shifts in global polarity exert a profound influence on foreign policy choices by Middle Eastern elites.

Great Power Strategies in the Middle East Under the New Great Power Competition

The reemergence of great power competition has eroded the U.S.-led liberal international order that emerged after the Cold War. This liberal order has gradually given way to a realist international order, in which great powers – mainly the United States, China, and Russia – compete for influence and power on the global stage. While the term “order” still applies as long as these great powers continue to interact within established regimes and institutions, their cooperation is largely instrumental and driven by shared interests in maintaining stability (e.g., nuclear non-proliferation) or reducing tensions (e.g., arms control) and conflict management. However, because of the intensifying nature of great power rivalry, even these institutions have increasingly become arenas of competition and influence.⁴

In line with this shift, the Biden administration released its National Security Strategy in 2022, officially declaring the end of the post-Cold War era. The document identified out competing China and constraining Russia as its top global priorities.⁵ That same year NATO for the first time in its history listed China among its strategic concerns, citing Beijing’s ambitions and “coercive policies” as threats to the alliance’s “interests, security, and values.” Russia was labeled “the most significant and direct threat.”⁶ The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy marked a shift in U.S. foreign policy within the bounded order under its hegemony, moving from an emphasis on preserving hegemony through institutional and normative means to a greater reliance

1 Shoemaker, Spanier 1984.

2 Monteiro 2014.

3 Gnedina 2015.

4 Mearsheimer 2019.

5 “Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

6 “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 29, 2022, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/strategic-concepts/nato-2022-strategic-concept>.

on power politics emphasizing American political and military dominance. Regarding relations with other great powers, the United States' new strategy moved away from earlier legal and moral justifications for sustaining global dominance – namely, the defense of a rules-based international order and the preservation of the liberal international order – and instead emphasized offensive realist logic.

This shift was reflected in an effort to reassert regional primacy in the Western Hemisphere, articulated through the so-called Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Alongside this, there was a tentative pursuit of accommodation with Russia in the European theater, aimed at stabilizing a *de facto* bipolar regional structure.¹ The strategy also seeks to enhance U.S. military and political capabilities in East Asia to prevent China from emerging as a regional hegemon, primarily by strengthening regional alliances, most notably the Quad, and by deterring China from projecting power beyond the first island chain.²

By contrast, Russia's National Security Strategy (2021),³ Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (2023),⁴ and China's National Security White Paper (2025)⁵ converge in their assessment that the international order is undergoing profound transformation toward multipolarity, notwithstanding what they portray as continued Western efforts to resist or reverse this shift. Russian official documents emphasize the return of power politics and the renewed centrality of military power in international affairs, alongside the weakening of international institutions. Chinese official discourse highlights the perceived dangers of U.S. policy in China's immediate neighborhood, accusing Washington of attempting to encircle China through the construction of exclusive minilateral blocks and an expanded U.S. military presence in the region.

Both China and Russia argue that the global balance of power is shifting because of uneven economic growth and the narrowing relative gap in power and wealth between the Western world and the Global South. They contend that this transformation should be reflected in the international order and maintain that Western behavior, specifically efforts to impede the 'natural' evolution of international and regional orders, – has heightened tensions and increased the risk of both global and regional conflicts.

This changing structure of the international system has two interdependent theoretical impacts on the U.S. position in the Middle East – both in relation to its regional clients and to its regional rivals. As the global system becomes more polarized, great powers are more likely to accept higher costs to support their regional clients. This is because intense rivalry transforms competition into a zero-sum game: any gain

1 A *détente* in Europe between the United States and Russia does not necessarily reduce competition between the two powers; rather, it may intensify rivalry in the Global South. By lowering the consumption of strategic resources and political attention in Europe, *détente* can enable both powers to redirect these assets toward other regions. The 1973 October War illustrates this dynamic: despite ongoing superpower *détente*, the conflict brought Washington and Moscow to the brink of direct confrontation in the Middle East as each sought to defend its regional clients.

2 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 5, 2025, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

3 "Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation," President of the Russian Federation, Presidential Decree No. 400, July 2, 2021, accessed January 3, 2026, https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/nss_rf_2021_eng_.pdf.

4 "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, approved by Presidential Decree No. 229, March 31, 2023, accessed January 3, 2026, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

5 "China's National Security in the New Era," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 12, 2025, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2025-09-08%202025%20China%20National%20Security%20White%20Paper%202025.pdf>.

by one great power is perceived as a loss for the other. In such an environment, great powers become more committed to preventing their clients from suffering major setbacks, as such defeats would harm not only their prestige but also their strategic position. Moreover, when rivalry intensifies, regional clients gain some leverage, as they may shift allegiance from one patron to another. This compels great powers to offer increased military and economic assistance to prevent client defection.¹

This logic challenges S. Yom's argument that the United States should pursue what he calls a "hegemonic retreat" from the Middle East. According to S. Yom,² the region no longer poses a serious threat to American security nor offers a significant opportunity for prosperity, and the U.S. should thus allow other powers (such as China and Russia) to fill the vacuum. However, this perspective overlooks the relative nature of power in international politics. As G. Snyder argues,³ a great power can become strategically dependent on a weaker ally if losing that ally strengthens the rival's position – not only in absolute but also in relative terms. For instance, if China and Russia succeed in building more military bases or strategic footholds in the Middle East, U.S. power projection capabilities will be weakened in relative terms. Given that China and Russia maintain significant economic ties with even America's closest allies in the region, the U.S. may feel increasingly dependent on the behaviors of its clients in their relations with great powers' rivals.

In this context, polarization pushes U.S. alliances in the Middle East toward an unusual configuration – symmetric interdependence. Polarization also creates new opportunities for U.S. rivals. Both China and Russia, motivated by systemic competition, may seek to form alliances with regional actors opposed to U.S. interests. By exporting resources and providing diplomatic and political support to U.S. adversaries, they can both constrain U.S. policy and gain strategic influence in the region. This dynamic resembles Cold War patterns, such as the Soviet Union's alliance with revolutionary Arab regimes, which significantly alarmed Washington. During that period, Middle Eastern regimes became clients of the superpowers, which used them to compete for regional dominance.⁴

To sum up, in theory, the polarization of the international system affects the U.S. position in the Middle East in two key ways: (1) it diminishes U.S. influence over its regional clients, and (2) it undermines its power (in terms of outcomes not resources) to contain regional rivals, because of the political and military backing that the latter receive from its great power rivals.

U.S. Strategy in the Middle East Amid Systemic Polarization: Offensive Dominance in Response to Global Rivalry

Great powers, however, are not equal by definition in their power capabilities and power projection capabilities. As E. Mansfield⁵ demonstrated, the polarity concept should not be confused with the concentration of power in the system. Indeed,

1 Handel 1990, 175–186; Efrat, Bercovitch 1991; Shoemaker, Spanier 1984.

2 Yom 2020.

3 Snyder 1997.

4 Tibi 1993; Gerges 1994.

5 Mansfield 1993.

the United States possesses unmatched military capabilities, allowing it to project force globally and maintain a dominant presence in critical regions, including the Middle East. Moreover, the U.S. is already a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, which allows it to allocate significant resources and attention abroad without having to defend its own sphere of influence.¹ In contrast, China and Russia lack both regional hegemony and the global power projection capacities.

The U.S. has already built a durable regional security architecture, especially after the Cold War, that neither Russia nor China can replicate in the near term. Furthermore, as T. Parsi² notes, U.S. clients in the region do not necessarily wish to end their relationships with Washington. Similarly, as M. Lynch³ demonstrates, U.S. Middle Eastern clients rely on Washington for their external and internal security. While they have diversified their relationships with other great and major powers, they often use those relationships as bargaining chips to reduce their perceived dependence on Washington. However, they continue to see the U.S. as the main security guarantor.

In theory, intensified great power competition could transform the U.S.–Middle East patron-client dynamic into a more symmetrical interdependence. However, systemic and regional factors suggest that the U.S. continues to enjoy disproportionate leverage over its clients. This asymmetry enables the U.S. regional alignments to counter Chinese and Russian interests. The United States has cultivated a series of asymmetrical alliances in the Middle East, structured as patron-client relationships in which it provides security guarantees for services and alignment from regional states. These alliances are not designed to aggregate capabilities against China and Russia in a conventional sense, but because of the high dependence of Middle Eastern clients on U.S. support, Washington can compel these clients to adopt policies that harm Chinese and Russian interests (even when such actions contradict the clients' own preferences).⁴

Indeed, in July 2022, U.S. President J. Biden visited Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in an effort to reaffirm American influence in the Middle East. Engaging with key regional leaders, including Saudi Crown Prince M. bin Salman, J. Biden emphasized his administration's commitment to regional security. According to CNN, this move aimed to prevent China and Russia from exploiting any leadership vacuum.⁵ The Biden administration threatened the Saudi regime after it refused to comply with demand to increase oil production in order to harm Russian interests.⁶ As an Indian scholar V. Prashad argues, many governments in the Global South, previously aligned with the U.S. and its allies (the Triad), are increasingly reluctant to adopt Washington's perspective, including its strategy to weaken Russia.⁷

1 Mearsheimer 2001.

2 Parsi 2021.

3 Lynch 2025.

4 Snyder 1997.

5 "Biden Tries to Ease Worries over U.S. Commitment to the Middle East in Meetings with Key Leaders," CNN, July 16, 2022, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/16/politics/biden-last-day-middle-east-trip/index.html>.

6 Peter Baker, "Biden Vows 'Consequences' for Saudi Arabia After Oil Production Cut," The New York Times, October 11, 2022, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/11/us/politics/biden-saudi-arabia-oil-production-cut.html>.

7 Vijay Prashad, "The Emergence of a New Non-Alignment: The Twenty-Fourth Newsletter," TriContinental: Institute for Social Research, June 15, 2023, accessed January 5, 2026, https://www.bresserpereira.org.br/23.06-the_emergence_of_a_new_no-nalignment.pdf.

In fact, the Biden-Harris administration's National Security Strategy, released in 2022, stressed prioritizing its global interests in containing Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East. The Strategy acknowledged the need to forgo excessive democracy promotion policies and the imposition of human rights through regime change, as in the Unipolarity Era, and emphasized the need to enhance its dominance in regional chokepoints, pressing its strategy for rolling back Iranian influence and expanding the so-called Abraham Accords in order to strengthen Israel's relations with the Arab world. This aim was to foster military integration among its regional clients under its political and military dominance, strengthening existing regional security architecture and impeding the expansion of global rivals' influence, primarily China and Russia.¹

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy in the Middle East, released in 2025, was similar to that of the Biden-Harris administration. Although it emphasized the need to forgo democracy promotion in the region and respect the cultural and political systems of the Middle East, the Trump administration preserved essentially the same strategy as the Biden administration: rolling back Tehran and its allies in the region, fostering Israel's relations with the Arab world (expanding the so-called Abraham Accords), nurturing the U.S. regional security architecture by increasing the military integration with regional allies, striving to maintain the region's chokepoints under U.S. Navy dominance, and blocking external great powers from expanding their influence in the region.²

In other words, Washington's strategy, because of its new global objectives, is following the polarization of the international system trying to roll back Chinese and Russian influence in the region and obtain unquestionable access and denied capability in the region during wartime over its global rivals. It pursues an offensive dominance strategy by strengthening its regional security architecture, based on the integration of its regional military clients under the U.S. umbrella, and rolling back the regional allies of its global rivals.

The China–Russia Strategy in the Middle East Under Global Polarization: Threat-Reduction Wedging, and Fostering an Independent Regional Order

As outlined above, the U.S. enjoys a systemic and regional comparative advantage over its global rivals, which prevents China and Russia from pursuing a similar strategy of offensive dominance in the Middle East. Nevertheless, given their growing rivalry with Washington, both powers are increasingly motivated to protect their interests in the region. Thus, unlike during the Cold War – when superpowers competed primarily by arming and supporting regional proxies – today's U.S. political and military dominance, largely consolidated after the Cold War, compels China and Russia to adopt a more subtle approach. Rather than directly confronting the U.S. or its allies,

1 "Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy," The White House, October 12, 2022, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

2 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 5, 2025, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

they focus on reducing American influence by reducing Washington's leverage over regional partners.

This approach reflects a wedge strategy, which T. Crawford defines as a state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost.¹ Under such conditions, China and Russia may attempt to use wedge strategies to indirectly accommodate U.S. partners, for instance, by providing security assistance to meet some needs currently fulfilled by the United States. However, these strategies are constrained by Washington's enduring leverage: target states that remain asymmetrically dependent on the U.S. are unlikely to engage meaningfully with Beijing or Moscow. As Y. Huang² shows, wedge strategies are ineffective under conditions of asymmetric dependence that favor the stronger ally.

China and Russia still have limited opportunities to influence the region. Instead of providing direct security assistance, they could focus on reducing regional tensions and facilitating integration among regional actors, lessening the pressure on U.S. regional clients. By creating a more cooperative regional environment, they may gradually reduce Middle Eastern states' reliance on U.S. protection, potentially converting asymmetric dependence into more symmetric relationships. A transformation of the relationship between the United States and its Middle Eastern client regimes – from one of asymmetric dependence to a more symmetric dependence – could enable, thus, these regimes to adopt a multi-vector foreign policy.³ By leveraging external competition, they could extract concessions and enhance their strategic autonomy. As regional threat levels decline, their dependence on the U.S. declines, and the U.S. clients may gain greater freedom to resist Washington's more coercive demands, including those aimed at curbing ties with China and Russia.

In this context, China and Russia may become more capable of offering inducements to U.S. clients, while Washington's ability to pressure its partners or prevent their cooperation with Beijing and Moscow would diminish. As a result, these regimes may also become more willing to resist U.S. attempts to undermine Chinese and Russian interests in the region. The U.S. may then find itself constrained by its own need to maintain influence and bases in a region where its clients enjoy more autonomy because of reduced threat levels.

In the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Russia emphasized the importance of supporting regional and subregional integration, including in the Middle East. It described the region as part of the Islamic civilization and highlighted the need for it to develop an independent center of power. Russia stressed maintaining relations with all regional actors (unlike the U.S. approach, which constructs allies and rivals) and promoting comprehensive reconciliation between regional competitors to enhance integration. The strategy aims to establish a sustainable and comprehensive regional order based on the capabilities of regional actors and regional organizations.⁴

1 Crawford 2011.

2 Huang 2020.

3 Gnedina 2015.

4 "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, approved by Presidential Decree No. 229, March 31, 2023, accessed January 3, 2026, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

Similarly, in 2021, W. Yi, Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office and Minister of Foreign Affairs, proposed China's Five-Point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East. He emphasized the need for an independent regional order, free from great power rivalry and external influence, and advocated an inclusive, reconciliatory approach to building a security architecture that accommodates the legitimate concerns of all regional actors.¹

To sum up, constrained by the systemic superiority of U.S. power and projection capabilities, the need to focus on their own regional priorities, and the entrenched U.S. regional security architecture in the Middle East, China and Russia pursue a strategy aimed at fostering regional integration among all actors, including U.S. rivals, and fostering an independent regional order. This approach reduces the threat perception that underpins U.S. clients' asymmetric dependence on Washington, thereby allowing China and Russia to offer incentives for Middle Eastern states. In doing so, they can wedge and undermine U.S. efforts to consolidate its alliance systems into a competitive network against Chinese and Russian interests in the region.

Case Study: the Impact of Great Power Strategies on Saudi–Iranian Relations: From Confrontation to *Détente*

The structural imbalance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia has long been a major concern for the Saudi elites, even during the Shah era. Indeed, while the Saudis' relative military weakness *vis-à-vis* other critical powers in the region has made foreign security guarantors a crucial need,² the relatively powerful Iran always strived to turn Iranian power into the policeman of the Gulf.³ Nevertheless, Tehran, aware of its inability to penetrate the Arab order and acquire legitimacy through power alone, has always striven to have good relations with the Arabs, although as a junior partner.⁴

This uneven balance of power, favoring Iran, and Tehran's need to provide legitimacy for its power, has led the Saudi elites to perceive a threat from Iran's ability to control the Gulf, and Tehran to be in crucial need of finding a kind of *modus vivendi* with the Saudis and avoiding an open confrontation in order to have a legitimate role in the Arab backyard. However, their shared threat of revolutionary secular Arabism and communism, and their falling under the same great power patron, the U.S.,⁵ enabled them to cooperate on issues where they shared common interests and avoid open conflict on issues where they perceived a conflict of interests.

The coming of a revolutionary Shia regime in Iran in 1979 has influenced Saudi–Iranian relations for four decades, albeit with some ups and downs. The Saudi elites perceived an existential threat not only to their internal stability⁶ but also to the stability of their smaller Arab Gulf neighbors from an Iranian subversion of their Shia citizens,

1 "Wang Yi Proposes a Five Point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 24, 2021, accessed January 3, 2026, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjih_dq_665435/2675_665437/2878_663746/2880_663750/202406/t20240607_11413200.html.

2 Gause 2002.

3 Keynough 2018, 85–105.

4 Parsi 2006.

5 Brannon 1994.

6 Chubin, Tripp 2006, 16–17.

and this turned them eager to construct the GCC as an attempt to promote cooperation against the rising Iranian threat to their regimes.¹ The new Iranian elites, before stabilizing their internal situation after the revolution, were invaded by Saddam's Iraq, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia in less explicit.² The lessons from the Iraqi-Iranian conflict regarding the role of the United States in the Gulf security architecture were a major source of contention between the Saudi and Iranian elites and heavily influenced their relationship.

The Iranian elites perceived that Iran should be the major player in the Gulf security architecture to safeguard its vital interests and that external powers, mainly the United States, should be excluded from the Gulf security architecture.³ Furthermore, the war served to reinforce the idea that Tehran was in dire need of relations with other great powers to replace the United States, and that it also needed to be self-reliant. It also created a feeling of isolation and distrust of the international order. At the end of the war, the Islamic Republic started reconstruction efforts, emphasizing the economy, which coincided with Iran's efforts to court China.⁴ The Saudi elites perceived that U.S. power is crucial to their security in the Gulf,⁵ especially after the eroding U.S. influence in Tehran's decision-making following the fall of the Shah.

Unipolar Global Structure Under U.S. Hegemony: Great Power Strategies in the Middle East and Their Influence on Saudi–Iranian Relations

The death of Khomeini, the coming of the relatively moderate (in the Saudi elites' perception) Rafsanjani and then Khatami administrations, and their sharing of the Saddam Hussein threat, turned Saudi and Iranian relations toward a *détente* in the 1990s.⁶ While Saudi-Iranian relationship grew more constructive in the 1990s, mainly because of domestic and regional factors, although tensions never completely ceased, U.S.-Iranian tensions caused grave concern among the Saudi elites about being entrapped in the conflict between Iran and the U.S. in the Gulf. The Saudi elites struggled not to let their rapprochement with Iran harm their relationship with Washington. The U.S. dual containment policy, along with its strategy of excluding Iran from the post-Cold War regional security architecture under U.S. political and military supremacy, empowered the radical faction in Tehran. This faction sought to escalate tensions not only with Washington but also by undermining the Iranian administration's 1990s efforts to settle differences with Saudi Arabia, which they saw as complicit in Washington's containment strategy.⁷

After the bombing of the U.S. military base in Saudi Arabia in 1996, resulting in the death of 19 U.S. servicemen, and Washington's accusation of Iranian involvement in the attacks, the Saudi elites found themselves at risk of being entrapped in an all-out war in the region. While Washington was preparing for a military response against Tehran, Riyadh's refusal to cooperate with the Americans rendered them

1 Al-Rasheed 2010, 152; Chubin, Tripp 2006, 11.

2 Keynough 2018, 120.

3 Chubin, Tripp 2006, 18.

4 Tabatabai, Esfandiary 2021.

5 Chubin, Tripp 2006, 19.

6 Keynough 2018, 131–150.

7 Ibid., 135–142.

unable to collect reliable evidence of Iranian involvement.¹ The Iranian elites strived to gain the support of another external great power, China, aimed to make China an ally in their struggle against the United States by forming an anti-American axis, including Russia, India, and Pakistan. Nevertheless, the Chinese abstained.² Likewise, China stopped its cooperation with Iran in developing its indigenous nuclear program because of Chinese concerns about risking their relations with Washington.³

Before the polarization of the international system, Beijing avoided security entanglements in the Middle East by relying on a hedging strategy that allowed it to free-ride on the U.S.-led security architecture. China enabled the United States to assume primary responsibility for regional security while simultaneously reaping the benefits of its economic activity and gradually expanding its political, economic, and military influence in the region in preparation for any potential future clash with the United States.⁴ Thus, while China perceived Iran as a crucial potential ally with rich energy resources, especially given that in any future Chinese-American confrontation, the Iranians would not be intimidated by the Americans, and the risk of Iran cutting off its energy exports to China because of U.S. pressure was almost negligible.⁵ China was unwilling to risk its relations with Washington (a critical factor in Chinese economic growth) for the sake of Tehran.

The American invasion of Iraq changed the regional distribution of power in Iran's favor. In 2005, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister from 1975 to 2015, Prince Saud bin Faisal Al Saud, argued, "The Americans handed over Iraq to Iran on a silver platter."⁶ Even Iranian officials admitted their joy at the impact of the U.S. invasion on their position in Iraq. Washington had unchained Iran by defeating its two main rivals, Saddam and the Taliban, "all the while getting itself bogged down in Mesopotamia... Iraq couldn't have turned out better for us," as claimed by an Iranian official in 2010.⁷ To make things worse, the political vacuum in Iraq after de-Baathification created a zero-sum game in Iraq between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁸ The Saudi elites perceived the growing influence of Tehran after the American invasion with grave concern. The Iranians accused the Saudi elites of cooperating with the United States in fighting against Iranian interests in Iraq.⁹ Iran, aware of its newly acquired influence in Iraq after toppling Saddam, and concerned about the presence of the American military next to its border, pressed for American withdrawal from Iraq and opposed any projects for extending the timeline for such withdrawal.¹⁰ The Saudis, meanwhile, pressed for the continuation of the American presence in Iraq and threatened that they would arm the Iraqi Sunnis as a counterweight to Iran in Iraq if the U.S. disengaged.¹¹

It is under this new regional configuration that the Saudi-Iranian *détente* failed, and the region entered the so-called Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shia unlimited struggle.

1 Clarke 2004, 118–120; Riedel 2019, 123–124.

2 Garver 2006.

3 Ibid., 224–226.

4 Salman, Geeraerts 2015.

5 Harold, Nader 2012.

6 Cited in Koch 2024.

7 Cited in Parsi 2008, 257.

8 Wehrey et al. 2008, 60.

9 Ibid., 64–67.

10 Keynough 2018, 194.

11 Suzanne Goldenberg, "If U.S. Leaves Iraq We Will Arm Sunni Militias, Saudis Say," The Guardian, December 14, 2006, accessed January 7, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/14/iraq.saudiarabia>.

Indeed, while the Iranian elites, after the refusal of the Bush administration of the Iranian offer in 2003, the so-called “grand bargain,”¹ started to sabotage American policies and interests in Iraq, the Saudi elites strove to tame American power and push for U.S. military strikes against the Iranian nuclear projects.² Likewise, because any global sanctions needed the acquiescence of the Chinese, the Bush administration and the Saudi elites strove to lure China to accept UN sanctions against Iran. The United States attempted to influence China’s stance on Iran’s nuclear program by framing China’s potential role as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ and indicating that U.S. judgment of China’s dedication to non-proliferation would depend directly on its actions toward Iran.³ The Saudis under U.S. auspices strove to export more oil to China in order to wean it off Iranian oil.⁴

While China has supported the UN resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran for its nuclear activities,⁵ they have succeeded in diluting their effects.⁶ In other words, while the still cooperative patterns between the United States and China made the latter unwilling to fully antagonize U.S. policy in the Middle East, the Chinese strove to reduce the effects of American policy in the region while preserving their relations with Washington.

Even with the coming of the Obama administration and its published and revealed policy of finding a kind of *modus vivendi* with Iran,⁷ the Saudi elites did not lose hope of taming American power to pursue their interests. Indeed, in 2010, the Saudi elites again pressured the new U.S. administration for a military attack against Iran, but without success.⁸ The Arab Spring destabilized Arab states, into which the Saudi–Iranian rivalry subsequently penetrated. The Obama administration’s attempt to build bridges with the Iranian elites caused the Saudi elites grave concerns about being abandoned by their patron in a significantly dangerous geopolitical landscape. To begin with, after the Saudi elites perceived the Obama administration’s betrayal in Egypt when the United States approved the fall of the decades-old Saudi and U.S. ally Mubarak, Saudi Arabia, perceiving an Iranian hand in the Bahrain domestic turmoil, threatened the United States with completely reevaluating their relationship with Washington if the latter supported what the Saudi elites perceived as “Iranian pawns” in Bahrain.⁹

After succeeding in stabilizing its small Arab Gulf neighbor, the Saudi elites became willing to pursue regime change in Syria, a decade-old Iranian ally,¹⁰ and roll back the Houthis’ political and military advances in Yemen, perceiving an opportunity to tame American power and help them roll back Iranian influence in the region. The Obama administration strove to avoid any entrapment in the Tehran-Riyadh proxy war in Syria and Yemen in order to focus on its long-pursued policy for a nuclear deal

1 Hunter 2010, 60; Parsi 2008, 243–252.

2 Ian Black, and Simon Tisdall, “Saudi Arabia Urges U.S. Attack on Iran to Stop Nuclear Programme,” The Guardian, November 28, 2010, accessed January 7, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cables-saudis-iran>.

3 Harold, Nader 2012.

4 Ibid.

5 UNSC Resolution 1696 and UNSC Resolution 1737 in 2006; UNSC Resolution 1747 in 2007; UNSC Resolution 1803 and UNSC Resolution 1835 in 2008; UNSC Resolution 1929 in 2010.

6 Van Kemenade 2010.

7 Michael Luo, and Jeff Zeleny, “Obama’s Account of New York Years Often Differs From What Others Say,” The New York Times, October 30, 2007, accessed January 10, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/02/us/politics/02obama.html>.

8 Riedel 2019, 156.

9 Ibid., 160.

10 Phillips 2016.

with Tehran. This policy left the Saudi elites and their concerns about their national interests sidelined by the Obama administration.¹ The Iranian elites' rapprochement with the United States under the Obama administration, and their success in increasing their influence in the Arab heartland, led the Saudi elites to perceive an existential threat to their own survival.²

Thus, although Obama's visit to the kingdom in 2015 to assure the Saudi elites that their rapprochement with Iran would not affect the U.S. commitment to the security of Saudi Arabia,³ the Saudis' fears of U.S. abandonment only made them more offensive toward Tehran. Indeed, the Saudis, along with their regional allies, conducted large military maneuvers practicing repelling a mock Iranian invasion of northern Saudi Arabia from Iraq in the winter of 2015–2016.⁴ Saudi–Iranian relations reached a new low in 2016 after the Saudi elites severed diplomatic relations with Tehran following an attack by Iranian protesters on the Saudi embassy.⁵ The attack occurred in response to the Saudi regime's execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi Shia cleric accused of conspiring with the Iranian regime against the Saudi monarchy.

The Iranian-American rapprochement continued to poison Saudi-American relations until the last days of the Obama administration's term. Obama's allegation that the Saudi and Iranian elites had to share the region⁶ and his accusation of Saudis as free-riders touched the deep concerns of the Saudi elites about being abandoned to their fate against a more powerful Iran.⁷ The Iranian elites, aware of their need to build a sober relationship with Saudi Arabia to operate without legitimacy concerns in the region, continued to seek some kind of compromise with the Saudi elites.⁸

With the coming of the Trump administration, the Saudi elites became eager to take full advantage of the Trump administration's hawkish behavior against Iran. Indeed, in May 2018, the Trump administration ended its participation in the so-called Iran deal, arguing that the Iranian deal failed to protect America's national security interests.⁹ Likewise, the Trump administration imposed more devastating sanctions on the Iranian economy.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Trump administration announced its aim to "bring Iran's oil exports to zero, denying the regime its principal source of revenue," and claimed that with the help of Saudi Arabia, the United States was working to ensure global oil markets remained well supplied.¹¹

1 Parsi 2017, 255–260.

2 Gause 2016.

3 Hussain 2015.

4 Riedel 2019, 175.

5 "Saudi Arabia Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Iran," Al Jazeera, January 4, 2016, accessed January 11, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/4/saudi-arabia-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran>.

6 "Remarks by President Obama in Q&A with the Press – Riyadh, Saudi Arabia," The White House, April 21, 2016, accessed January 11, 2026, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/remarks-president-obama-qa-press-riyadh-saudi-arabia>.

7 "Saudi Prince Hits Back at Obama – 'No, We Are Not Free Riders,'" The Jerusalem Post, March 14, 2016, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/saudi-prince-hits-back-at-obama-no-we-are-not-free-riders-447841>.

8 Mohammad 2022, 292.

9 "President Donald J. Trump on Ending United States Participation in the Unacceptable Iran Deal," The White House, 2018, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov>.

10 "President Donald J. Trump on Reimposing Sanctions Lifted Under the Horrible Iran Deal," The White House, 2018, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov>.

11 "President Donald J. Trump on Working to Bring Iran's Oil Exports to Zero," The White House, 2019, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov>.

The Trump administration led the Saudi and Iranian elites to engage in unprecedentedly explicit public discourse against each other, not seen even during the most confrontational era in Saudi-Iranian relations: from delegitimizing each other's regimes, accusing each other of sectarianism and terrorism, and even threatening each other with military actions.¹ While the Saudi elites became more confident under the Trump administration in their ability to deter Tehran, the Iranian elites, provoked by the administration's offensive rhetoric, grew more cohesive and adopted a more revolutionary tone. Aware of Saudi concerns dating back to the Clinton era, they signaled that any U.S. military action against Tehran would make Saudi Arabia a legitimate target, demonstrating that U.S. security protection alone would not ensure Saudi safety.² The escalation between the U.S. and Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran, on the other hand, was crowned by a drone and missile attack on Saudi Aramco, the world's biggest oil processing facility. The Saudi elites, with the inaction of the U.S. military and their failure to protect Aramco, the main revenue source for the Saudi crown prince's vision, started to change their tone and policies toward Tehran and adopt a more conciliatory approach.³

*Polarization of the Structure of International System, Great Power Strategies
in the Middle East and Their Influence on Saudi–Iranian Relations*

The polarization of the structure of the international system compelled China to penetrate heavily into the regional security architecture in order to reduce U.S. influence in the region. China, by wedging through reducing the level of threat under which U.S. clients operate, could decrease Washington's influence on its client regimes in the region. This strategy would render Washington unable to turn its alliance with Middle Eastern regimes in the region into a competitive alliance against Chinese interests, as the U.S. clients do not have any interest in participating in the conflicts of their patron that do not align with their own interests.

Since 2022, China's involvement in the regional security agenda⁴ has played a pivotal role in enabling Saudi-Iranian *détente*, with China acting as the only great power with sufficient leverage over Iran. Thus, Oman – owing to its long-standing sober relations with Tehran and its enduring strategy of breaking Iran's regional isolation – and Iraq – seeking to mitigate the Iranian–Saudi rivalry that, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, had turned the country into a battleground for their proxy conflict – played major roles in facilitating Iranian–Saudi negotiations. Only China could alleviate Saudi concerns regarding a potential Iranian defection from the agreement. Consequently, China played a key role in facilitating cooperative relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasized the talks were initiated at the request of President Xi Jinping, reflecting China's support for developing good neighborly relations between the two states.

1 Mohammad 2022, 298–302.

2 Ibid., 340–342.

3 Ibid., 347–348.

4 Amrita Jash, "Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator," Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, June 23, 2023, accessed January 12, 2026, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/conflict-security/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator/>.

According to the agreement reached between President Xi Jinping and the leaderships of Saudi Arabia and Iran, China would host and sponsor the dialogue between the two states.¹ The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson maintained that the talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in China reflect Chinese efforts to help regional countries reduce external interference and take control of their own futures. The spokesperson emphasized that China believes the future of the Middle East should be determined by countries in the region, and that China supports the people of the Middle East in independently exploring their development paths. China also affirmed that it will continue to play a role as a responsible major power in this process.²

For the Iranian elites, as discussed above, reaching accommodation with the most influential Arab state has long been a strategy for gaining legitimacy in the Arab world. The *post-détente* environment, fostered by China, has indeed allowed Iran greater diplomatic maneuverability, as exemplified by Iranian Foreign Minister A. Araghchi's visits to Jordan and Egypt in 2024.³

For the Saudi leadership, reliance predominantly on Washington after the Cold War significantly constrained their room to maneuver in the region. During the 1990s, Saudi Arabia's attempts to pursue limited engagement with Iran were largely undermined by U.S. antagonism toward Tehran. Under the Bush and Trump administrations, this alignment did not deter Iran, but emboldened Tehran's assertive regional posture. The perceived abandonment by the Obama administration during the 2015 nuclear deal heightened Saudi fears of strategic vulnerability.

China's entry as a mediator offered Riyadh a unique opportunity: an external power that could both influence Iran and reduce Saudi dependence on the United States. This development enabled the Kingdom to adopt a multi-vector foreign policy,⁴ leveraging both Washington's security umbrella and Beijing's influence over Tehran. Although the U.S. remains Saudi Arabia's principal military partner – evident in the 2025 arms deal⁵ and the U.S.-Saudi Economic and Defense Partnership signed in November 2025⁶ – Riyadh's diplomatic posture has shifted.

The Trump administration in 2025 did not disrupt the ongoing Saudi-Iranian *détente* and highlighted the influence of emerging global and regional dynamics on Chinese and Saudi behavior in response to U.S. policy toward Iran. Unlike during the unipolar era, China was unwilling to align with U.S. policy in the region. Beijing sought to leverage its position in the UN Security Council and, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempted to extend sanctions relief to Iran for six months under the nuclear deal and

1 "Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 10, 2023, accessed January 13, 2026, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367487.html.

2 "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Saudi Arabia - Iran Talks in Beijing," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 11, 2023, accessed January 14, 2026, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11349765.html.

3 "Iran FM Abbas Araghchi Flies to Jordan, Egypt as Regional Tour Continues," The Jerusalem Post, October 17, 2024, accessed January 14, 2026, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-825002>.

4 Gnedina, 2015.

5 Mike Stone, and Peshia Magid, "Exclusive: Trump Poised to Offer Saudi Arabia Over \$100 Billion Arms Package, Sources Say," Reuters, April 25, 2025, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-poised-offer-saudi-arabia-over-100-bln-arms-package-sources-2025-04-24/>.

6 "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," The White House, November 18, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-solidifies-economic-and-defense-partnership-with-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>.

to prevent the so-called “snapback” mechanism, which would have reimposed more severe UN-backed sanctions on Tehran.¹

The Saudi strategic flexibility was clear in 2025 when Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman visited Tehran. This act was hailed by Iranian reformist M. Abtahi as a milestone in bilateral normalization.² In a notable shift from previous positions, Saudi Arabia even signaled its willingness to mediate between the Trump administration and Iran, using its improved relations with both sides to facilitate potential negotiations on Tehran’s nuclear program.³ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia was relatively immune from the regional escalation that followed the Israeli war in Gaza. This war spread into Lebanon and Syria, and culminated in the eleven-day Israeli-Iranian war. The Saudi elites still rely heavily on their U.S. patron for security matters. The China-brokered agreement, however, has proven extremely effective in shielding Saudi-Iranian relations from deterioration, especially following Washington’s intervention in the Israeli-Iranian war, its bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities, and Iran’s retaliation against a U.S. base in Qatar.

Although Iran’s attack was directed at Washington, it nevertheless constituted a grave breach of Qatari sovereignty. This could have led to further escalation among the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, on the same day that a ceasefire was reached between Iran and Israel (and, by extension, the U.S.), Iranian President M. Pezeshkian called Saudi Crown Prince M. bin Salman (MBS), the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, during which the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining the ongoing *détente*.⁴ The Iranian protests that erupted in December 2025 posed a major internal challenge to the regime and escalated further because of perceived involvement by Israel and the United States. These countries were seen as trying to exploit the unrest to destabilize Tehran. These developments heightened tensions between Iran and the United States, even prompting U.S. threats of military intervention. However, the Saudi elites, eager to preserve the *détente* with Iran and leveraging their influence in Washington, were among the key regional actors who urged the Trump administration to de-escalate tensions and refrain from military action.⁵

This transformation in Saudi foreign policy reflects a significant reduction in dependence on Washington and a recalibration of Riyadh’s strategic calculus. By securing China’s commitment to *détente*, the Saudi elites have effectively diversified their alignment portfolio and mitigated the risks of both entrapment and abandonment by their traditional Western patron.

1 “Security Council LIVE: Resolution to Avoid ‘Snapback’ of UN Sanctions on Iran Fails,” United Nations, September 26, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165968>.

2 “Iran - Saudi Rapprochement Benefits Region, Says Reformist Iranian Politician,” IFP Editorial Staff, Iran Front Page, April 26, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://ifpnews.com/iran-saudi-rapprochement-region-iranian-politician/>.

3 “Saudi Arabia Seeks to Mediate Between Trump and Iran on New Nuclear Deal,” CNN, February 16, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/16/middleeast/saudi-arabia-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-intl/index.html>.

4 “Saudi Crown Prince Welcomes Iran – Israel Ceasefire in Call with Pezeshkian,” Al Arabiya English, June 24, 2025, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2025/06/24/saudi-crown-prince-welcomes-iranisrael-ceasefire-in-call-with-pezeshekian>.

5 “Iran’s Gulf Rivals Warn U.S. Against Strike on Tehran,” The Wall Street Journal, January 2026, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/irans-gulf-rivals-warn-u-s-against-strike-on-iran-1388236>; “Gulf States and Turkey Urged Trump Not to Launch Strikes Against Iran,” The Guardian, January 15, 2026, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/15/gulf-states-and-turkey-urged-trump-not-to-launch-strikes-against-iran>; “Gulf Countries Gear Up Diplomacy to Stave Off U.S.–Iran Escalation,” Al Jazeera English, January 17, 2026, accessed January 21, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/16/gulf-countries-gear-up-diplomacy-to-stave-off-us-iran-escalation>.

Table 1.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM, U.S. AND CHINESE STRATEGIES, AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS
СТРУКТУРА МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ СИСТЕМЫ, СТРАТЕГИИ США И КИТАЯ И ИХ ВЛИЯНИЕ НА САУДОВСКО-ИРАНСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ

The Structure of the International System	Great Power Strategies in the Middle East	Saudi Position vis-à-vis the Great Powers	Iranian Position vis-à-vis the Great Powers	Saudi-Iranian Relationship
Unipolar Structure Under the U.S. Hegemony	1) U.S. regional dominance under Clinton and Bush. 2) U.S. Partial Disengagement under Obama. 3) U.S. Selective Engagement under Trump. 4) China's hedging in the region, while seeking to disrupt U.S. policies without risking their relationship with Washington.	1) Saudi heavy dependence on Washington for security (high risk of both entrapment and abandonment). 2) Saudi minimal attention to Chinese policies.	1) Iranian encirclement by U.S. power in the region. 2) Iranian attempts, though unsuccessful, to draw China into its conflict with Washington in the region.	1) Iranian suspicion of Saudi intentions due to Saudi heavy dependence on Washington. 2) Saudi security interests' dependence on the Iranian-U.S. relationship. 3) Saudi-Iranian "cold war."
Polarization of the Structure of International System	1) U.S. Offensive Dominance Strategy: pursuing regional dominance to serve broader global objectives. 2) China's Threat-Reduction Wedging: reducing dependence of U.S. clients on Washington, thereby limiting U.S. leverage in the region.	1) Saudi persistent reliance on the U.S. for security, but less dependent on U.S. for its security relations with Tehran. 2) Saudi reliance on Chinese influence to maintain its "cold peace" with Iran.	1) Iranian persistent tense relationship with the U.S. 2) Iranian reliance on Chinese effort to reduce U.S. influence in the region.	1) Enhanced Saudi image in Iranian perception after Saudi decreasing dependence on Washington. 2) Decrease in Saudi perception of Iranian aggressive intentions due to China's role as a security guarantor in its relationship with Tehran. 3) Saudi-Iranian "cold peace."

Source: Compiled by the author's theoretical framework and empirical assessment.

Discussion

By presenting a distinct form of wedging, this article demonstrates how states that previously could not disrupt or counter emerging alliances through traditional strategies can now overcome these limitations. Traditional wedging, as conceptualized by Crawford,¹ has proven insufficient for actors like China and Russia, who seek to limit the United States' ability to exploit the dependence of its regional clients on its political and military power in order to pursue its broader global objectives of rolling back Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East. This is because of the U.S. superior power and power projection capabilities and its long-standing security partnerships with regional clients, which solidify alliances resilient to traditional disruptive tactics. The relationships between the U.S. and its Middle Eastern clients remain characterized

1 Crawford 2011.

by asymmetric dependence, heavily influenced by the high-threat environments these regional actors face. This persistent asymmetry, even in a polarized global system, makes it difficult for clients to build partnerships with China and Russia when relying on traditional approaches, as stressed by Yuxing Huang.¹

This paper proposes that a new strategy focused on reducing the level of threat perceived by U.S. clients can weaken American influence in the region. By fostering a Middle Eastern regional order based on cooperative interactions among regional actors rather than on U.S. military power (through facilitating comprehensive conflict resolution) this approach reduces dependence of Middle Eastern states on their U.S. patron. At the same time, it enhances their capacity to resist U.S. pressure and pursue cooperation with China and Russia on issues of shared interest. This is the mechanism through which the new form of threat-reduction wedging can potentially succeed.

However, this strategy has a crucial limitation: it can only be effectively implemented by China and Russia if the target actor (the U.S. client) is genuinely willing to reduce tensions with another regional actor. Essentially, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the target actor's inclination toward the *status quo* in its key regional relationships. This form of wedging is thus primarily effective when the target actor's behavior is driven by threat perception and survival considerations. This limitation aligns with what could be labeled as a neo-realist *status quo* bias, as termed by Schweller.² Conversely, if the target actor is motivated by power and profit – acting as a revisionist, at least concerning its relations with a specific regional actor or on a particular issue – a wedging strategy predicated on reducing regional tensions is likely to fail.

This limitation is evident in China and Russia's inability to influence over escalating threats and regional tensions in the Middle East, particularly amid Israel's aggressive behavior in the region and the destabilizing consequences for the regional subsystem. As J. Mearsheimer and S. Walt³ argue, Israel, unlike other regional powers, wields significant influence over U.S. policy in the Middle East, enabling it to shape Washington's political and military resources in pursuit of its objectives. With a revisionist regional agenda and substantial capacity to shape U.S. decision-making, Israel offers little scope for Chinese or Russian mediation efforts.

This dynamic heightens the threat perceptions of U.S. regional clients, reinforcing their dependence on Washington and undermining Chinese and Russian attempts to reduce that reliance. China and Russia currently lack the leverage or capabilities necessary to pressure Israel into restraint. As a result, U.S. clients remain heavily reliant on Washington's willingness to constrain Israel's actions in Gaza and its broader regional policies. Thus, while the Saudi elites have shifted a portion of their security needs toward China through their *détente* with Tehran, they continue to face a weak position *vis-à-vis* Washington, especially, when it comes to deterring Israeli hawkish behavior in the region. Indeed, following the Israeli strikes on Doha, the second-closest ally of the United States in the region after Israel, Qatar turned to the United States

1 Huang 2020.

2 Schweller 1996.

3 Mearsheimer, Walt 2008.

and succeeded in obtaining U.S. security guarantees against external threats.¹ Given the current high level of Israeli animosity toward Qatar – crowned by strikes against Hamas on Qatari sovereign territory – Qatari decision-makers perceive U.S. security guarantees as the only viable path to achieving security.²

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the escalating polarization of the international system shapes great power strategies in the Middle East and the impact of these strategies on regional outcomes. Our paper argues that systemic factors – a regional hegemony in its own backyard and superior military projection capabilities – coupled with regional factors – an established regional security architecture and regional alliances – enable the U.S. to pursue an offensive dominance strategy in the region. It contends that Washington seeks to roll back forces deemed hostile to U.S. interests in the region and to construct a regional order under its dominance. This strategy aims to transform its alliances with Middle Eastern client regimes into a competitive bulwark against Chinese and Russian influence by rendering its clients highly dependent on U.S. political and military support. The significant dependence of these regimes on U.S. protection, amid high-threat environments, limits their bargaining power, often compelling them to accommodate U.S. demands even when such compliance contradicts the national interests of the Middle Eastern client states.

This paper argues that China and Russia, although great powers, are neither regional hegemons in their own backyards nor possess U.S.-level military power-projection capabilities. These systemic factors prevent them from pursuing the same offensive dominance strategy as Washington. Traditional wedging strategies by China and Russia are insufficient, constrained by Washington's post-Cold War security architecture and the reluctance of its partners to sever established ties. In response, China and Russia have developed a novel form of wedging focused on reducing the high threat perceptions of U.S. clients and on pursuing, through political and diplomatic tools, an independent Middle Eastern order. This threat-reduction strategy can shift alliances from asymmetric to more symmetric dependence, granting Middle Eastern regimes greater agency to pursue multi-vector foreign policies and enabling cooperation with China and Russia on shared regional security concerns. Such a transformation would diminish Washington's leverage over its allies, constraining its capacity to isolate Beijing and Moscow.

The Saudi–Iranian rapprochement illustrates the potential for threat-reduction wedging. China's growing role in the regional security architecture has provided Riyadh and Tehran with a pathway toward *détente*, reducing Saudi Arabia's dependence on Washington and facilitating cooperation with Beijing. By lowering the strategic costs for Saudi Arabia by engaging China, this dynamic strengthens Chinese influence and limits U.S. leverage. The Israeli case, however, discussed above, underscores the limits of this approach: Israel's revisionist orientation has heightened the threat perceptions

1 "Trump Gives Qatar Unprecedented Security Guarantee After Israeli Attack," Axios, October 1, 2025, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.axios.com/2025/10/01/trump-qatar-security-guarantee-israel-attack>.

2 "Assuring the Security of the State of Qatar," The White House, September 17, 2025, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/assuring-the-security-of-the-state-of-qatar/>.

of U.S. clients and reinforced their reliance on Washington. Consequently, this dynamic constrains China's and Russia's ability to diminish U.S. influence in the Middle East.

Ultimately, this analysis shows that the effectiveness of China's and Russia's strategy is constrained by the United States' superior relative power and the agency of regional actors. Although it offers a promising mechanism for challenging U.S. influence, its success remains contingent on the strategic interests of U.S. client regimes operating under persistent U.S. military dominance.

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Стратегии великих держав: наступательное господство и снижение угрозы «вклинивания» на Ближнем Востоке

АННОТАЦИЯ

В исследовании рассматривается, как растущая поляризация международной системы формирует конкуренцию великих держав на Ближнем Востоке. Зависимость т.н. клиентов от Вашингтона в вопросах внутренней и внешней безопасности позволяет США проводить наступательную стратегию доминирования, направленную на установление регионального порядка, соответствующего ключевой цели – сдерживанию Китая и России. В ответ Пекин и Москва используют особую форму противодействия, направленную на снижение восприятия угрозы клиентами и содействие разрешению конфликтов. Эта стратегия ориентирована на изменение асимметричной модели зависимости в альянсах США на Ближнем Востоке за счет повышения автономии клиентов и сотрудничества с Китаем и Россией там, где интересы совпадают. Саудовско-иранское сближение иллюстрирует потенциал такого «вклинивания», в то время как израильский пример демонстрирует его пределы. В целом эффективность стратегий Китая и России остается крайне ограниченной по сравнению с США из-за проекции военного потенциала США и зависимости региональных игроков.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Ближний Восток, великие державы, наступательное господство, стратегия сдерживания угроз

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