Implications of the Sino-American Rivalry on the Persian Gulf Security

by
Tawfiq Yahya J Alfaifi

Topic Coordinator & Supervisor
Dr. Luis da Vinha

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the problem of regional security in the Middle East in light of contemporary geopolitical developments at the international and regional levels. The current and future economic and security scenarios for the region are considered taking into account the disengagement of the United States from its long-held role in the region, leaving a security vacuum, simultaneous with China's increasing engagement in the regional economic sector. From the 1950s to the early 1990s, the global level of Great Power's security rivalry has been either aligned with, or reinforced by, patterns of regional security rivalry. With the renewed Great Power competition, it appears that the US offshore balancing strategy and China's strategic ambiguity are the two approaches in which each side will advance its security and economic interests in the Middle East.

The study aimed to determine the most prominent possible repercussions of the Sino-American rivalry on the security of the Persian Gulf. It investigated whether China is willing and capable to fill the Middle East security vacuum and explored how Washington and Beijing have each pursued their separate regional security objectives. The study argues that Middle East security has become an increasingly regional affair that regional powers are being forced to deal with. Concurrently, China has adopted a non-interventionist approach to consolidating its regional economic interests, offering regional states the lure of participation in its Belt and Road Initiative, while taking advantage of the urgent need of regional actors to diversify their economies. Despite lowering of priority in the region during the past decade, the study anticipates that Washington will seek to prevent China from achieving relative gains in the area of its historical hegemony. As the US is drawn back to the region for counterbalancing of China's rise and protecting US status in the global power rivalry with China, its purposes will tend to focus more on liberal democratic and human rights values and strategic economic considerations than on the previous security role. This study shows that there is no global power other than the US willing or capable to fill the current Middle Eastern security vacuum. Thus, the regional powers have rushed to fill this void since 2011, either by maximising power or maximising security. The study justifies its conclusion that the formation of pragmatic alliances, even of former adversaries, based on the preservation of existential interests of states, is a likely future scenario bearing in mind the increasing regionalisation of the Middle East.

DECLARATION

I certify that this research project does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Tawfiq Yahya J Alfaifi

Signature.....  .....

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DEDICATION

This thesis work is dedicated to my Wife, Seham. Without her constant support and encouragement, my journey would not have been successful, and my dreams would not have been fulfilled. I also dedicate my research to my beloved Kids, Rakan, Laura, and Yara, who I hope will read it someday when they grow up. To my lovely family, thank you for supporting me in every way while writing this thesis. I am truly thankful for having you in my life.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
B3W	Build Back Better World
B/D	Barrels a Day
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BoIT	Balance-of-Interest Theory
BoPT	Balance-of-Power Theory
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	The US Central Intelligence Agency
CGIT	China Global Investment Tracker
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces (the US fifth fleet in Bahrain)
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
EIA	The US Energy Information Administration
FSI	Fragile States Index
GAS	Saudi Arabia's General Authority for Statistics
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GFP	Global Fire power Index
GOI	Government of Iraq
INSSG	Interim National Security Strategy Guideline
IRI	The Islamic Republic of Iran
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LAS	League of Arab States
LoC	Library of Congress
MER	Management Expense Ratio
MMERSC	Middle East Regional Security Complex
MIC25	Made in China 2025
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NDS	National Defense Strategy of The United States
NSCT	National Strategy for Combating Terrorism of The United States
NSS	National Security Strategy of The United States
NPT	Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PCEC	Pakistan-China Economic Corridor
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRC\PCR	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi
RoT	Republic of Turkey
RSC	Regional Security Complex
RSCT	Regional Security Complexes Theory
SCS	South China Sea
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USIP	The United States Institute of Peace
USTR	The United Sates Trade Representative
WMD	Weapon of Mass Destruction

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Middle East Regional Security Complex

When politics is being debated in the field of international relations (IR), international variables are important. Since the end of World War II, the map of international politics has undergone successive fundamental shifts that have dramatically affected the global political structure. Examples of these shifts have been the decolonisation and emergence of the nation-state, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of communism, the unipolarity of the international system, and the decline of Great Power penetrations of regional dynamics (Buzan 2003, pp. 144-5). Significantly, the post-colonial era left autonomous Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) with interconnected security problems (Buzan 2003, p. 141). Hence, these developments have contributed to the emergence of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a new regionalist framework for conducting security studies (Buzan 1983; Buzan & Wæver 2003). While regionalism was a significant feature of post-colonial era security architecture, it gained new momentum following the end of the Cold War, as the international security order became more regionalised (Buzan 2003, p. 145). Thus, given the increasing autonomy of RSCs, the regional rather than the national perspective has been emphasised in conducting security studies.

During the Cold War, the Middle East Regional Security Complex (MERSC) had been an arena for rivalry and cooperation on the one hand, and a theatre for ideological and political rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union on the other. According to Kamrava (2018, p. 598), "the international relations of the Middle East have long featured turmoil, instability, and tension". At the regional level of security, securitisation processes centred around self-determination, sovereignty, and amity and enmity patterns, distribution of power logic, and competitive multipolarity. These securitisation concerns have encouraged regional, non-state actors to 'call outside help' (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 46). These regional patterns of rivalry have shown strong regional security interdependence on the one hand, and have lined up with, and been reinforced by, global powers ones on the other (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 52). For example, Arab nationalists and Islamists have securitised the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to the outbreak of four major wars that have involved intense participation of regional powers and strong penetrations of the Great Powers of the US and Soviet Union or Russia.

In the post-Cold War era, the whole pattern of international security was influenced by the demise of the communist threat and the supremacy of the US-liberal international order (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 25). During the era of American hegemony in the Middle East (1990-2010) (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014, p. 54), the US had a major security role in liberating Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation, yet Baghdad was weakened militarily (the Second Gulf War). Consequently, the distribution of power in the Gulf subcomplex was disrupted, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have become more dependent on the US security role, and the Israeli-Arab peace process began (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 201). In addition, since the September 11 (9/11) terrorist attacks on its soil, the US securitisations rhetoric has intensified, justifying the imperative of pre-emptive wars (Mearsheimer & Walt 2009). As an inevitable consequence of the Third Gulf War, the polarity of the Gulf subcomplex has become bipolar, intensifying the dynamics of the security rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, despite the imbalances in the balance of power in the Gulf subcomplex as a result of the successive Gulf Wars, Washington has long been seen as a military and political guarantor of the status quo for the states in the Middle East. This partnership has been relational (oil-for-security). Notwithstanding, maintaining the status quo regional order was a prerequisite; therefore, this has excluded oil-producing Iran due to its revisionist tendencies. However, while most of such partnership's solid foundations have been de-securitised, Israel's security and other non-military securities (e.g., human security) may shape US regional policy in the years to come. Thus, the disengagement of US historical and unchecked hegemony from the Middle East was a nightmare for the regional status quo powers and bright dawn for revisionist ones[1].

1.2 Sino-American Strategic Rivalry and the Middle East Security Question

In light of the renewed security competition of the Great Powers, Washington emphasised the imperative of the *Pivot to Asia* (Clinton 2011; Obama 2011), while Beijing emphasised the counter-balance strategy of *Marching Westwards* (Jisi 2014). Since 2011, the Middle Eastern importance to Washington's vital interests has been progressively de-prioritised with an emphasis on the geo-economic and geo-strategic weight of the Asia-Pacific region. Realistically, the potential threats that might affect America's security and prosperity no longer stem from the Middle East, but rather from the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, containing China's ambitions has become a primary interest in maintaining the US-led liberal international order's primacy (Gerges 2013, pp. 299-300; Goldberg

[1] In this study, regional powers in the Middle East have been defined as the *two status quo powers* (Israel, Saudi Arabia), *a limited-aims revisionist power* (Turkey), and *an unlimited-aims revisionist power* (Iran).

2016, p. 82; NSS 2015, p. 24). Nevertheless, Beijing is determined to pursue its revisionist ambitions beyond its geography.

In the Middle East, where oil is a vital pillar to the Chinese economy and attractive to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been able to pursue its strategic partnership with all the competing regional powers alike. Despite its strategic ambiguity, China's comprehensive partnerships approach to the region has been seen first and foremost as an *existential interest* for most of the region's economies that depend heavily on oil revenues. Moreover, China's multi-billion-dollar strategic partnership with Iran has been a lifeline for Tehran and a hedge for Beijing against the US. Although an Iranian-Chinese partnership may have been unsettling to the regional status quo powers (i.e., Israel and GCC states), it would enhance their economic security required for them to move forward in attracting Chinese investment flows.

After all, it turns out that the penetration of China's economic influence into Washington's historical legacy cannot not be overlooked. Containing China's ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region requires restricting its access to the reinforcements of its military power. As Mearsheimer (2019, p. 46) emphasised, "economic might is the foundation of military might". Therefore, it will be in Washington's vital interest to dismantle China's partnerships in the Middle East as a whole and the oil-rich Gulf in particular. That notwithstanding, it should be emphasised that the Sino-American rivalry is likely to create more room for political manoeuvring than existed in the unipolar era (Walt 2021, p. 3).

1.3 Research Question(s)

Although the RSCT favours a regional level of analysis, it does not de-emphasise the global level of security. Indeed, during the post-Cold War period, this level has operated strongly in the Middle East (e.g., The Second and Third Gulf Wars). However, despite the increasing regionalisation of Middle East security dynamics after the Arab Spring (2011), the re-emergence of Great Powers and intensification of competition among them may revitalise the global level in the Middle East. The security interests of China and America are large-scale, and both are engaging in balance-of-power policies to enhance their relative gains. Hence, this study examines the growing People's Republic of China (PRC) strategic interests in a region dominated by America since the 1950s. Since the study's problem revolves around seeking to understand and realise the nature and motives of the

Sino-American strategic rivalry, and the potential implications of this growing competition on the Persian Gulf security, the study's main research question is:

How does the growing Sino-American rivalry affect the Persian Gulf security?

To provide a comprehensive answer to the main question, the following four sub-questions are:

1. *What has regional security looked like in the Middle East since decolonisation?*
2. *What are the US and China's security objectives at the global level?*
3. *What are the US and China's security objectives in the Middle East?*
4. *What are the implications of Sino-American competition on the Persian Gulf's security?*

1.4 Thesis Statement

Despite this security and political vacuum that has arisen, security in the Middle East is increasingly becoming a regional affair. In other words, regional actors (e.g., Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) must respond to the security void in a more independent manner. At least in the foreseeable future, neither Russia, which is economically exhausted, nor China, preoccupied with its regional security, is willing to play the security role that the US has played. Although the Middle East region has become a peripheral interest to Washington, to pursue its major interests, the US decisionmakers may seek a new favourable balance of power that is not dominated by any regional power. Therefore, offshore balancing strategies will be sufficient to this end. Nevertheless, an onshore balancing strategy would be the last resort to defend Israel. Moreover, the question of China-dominated regional economic security will remain problematic; therefore, an alternative may need to be provided to stabilise the balance of power in the region. Therefore, in the context of Sino-American rivalry, it is likely that Washington will not allow China to dominate the region economically because that would reduce US Middle Eastern historical standing over time.

Thus, with a determined rising power (the PRC) having its own interests and goals, and a superpower (the US) having already mastered how to manage long-term Great Power competitions, the countries of the region will seek to reassess their strategies and alliances to serve their national interests in relation to the competing influences in the region of the PRC and the US. Regionally, to achieve security, the regional and small powers will test pragmatic cooperation. However, this option is doomed to failure due to the strong dynamics of the security dilemma. Therefore, to ensure the survival and prosperity of countries of the Middle East region, the thesis of this study is that: 1)

revisionist states will seek to compete for regional hegemony and maximise their power; 2) status quo states will seek to maximise their security by forming pragmatic alliances in response to a common existential threat and in keeping with existing regional order arrangements; and 3) small and vulnerable nations will seek appeasement strategies to enhance their chances of survival. The thesis will be argued through answering the research questions posed in this section and by addressing the following series of key aims and objectives.

1.5 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to present a comprehensive picture of regional security in the Middle East, while it also aims to investigate the possible impact of the renewed competition between the US and China on the security dynamics of the Middle East. To accomplish these aims, the main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate whether military-political security has become a regional affair, or whether China is *willing* and *capable* to take over the US's long-term mission.

2. To examine the importance of the economic security factor in the hedging strategies of the regional countries.

3. To predict, on a theoretical basis, what the responses of regional actors will be to perceived threats.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of seven sections. This introductory section provides the background to the problem, the research questions, and the aims and objectives. The second section systematically reviews the RSCT to understand the RSC's structure, penetration mechanisms, and securitisation stages of public issues. In the third section, the MERSC is explored, emphasising its key security dynamics as a starting point. Although the RSCT has four levels of analysis, an inter-regional level will be de-emphasised because security interactions between the MERSC and its surroundings are limited. The fourth section addresses the critical question of the polarity of the international order for the twenty-first century, highlighting the Sino-American security objectives accordingly. This enables the study to synthesise a conceptual framework that assists in understanding the vital interests guiding the grand strategies of China and America. Then, the fifth section investigates the nature of US and China interests in the Middle East and how each advances its own. In the sixth

section, the implications of the Sino-American rivalry on the Persian Gulf's traditional military-political and economic securities are analysed. While the position of regional security guarantor has remained vacant, China has been entrusted with the region's economic concerns. Given the security vacuum, regional actors are likely to seek pragmatic security alliances to maximise their security, while some may be inclined to take advantage of the revisionist gene it shares with China to maximise power. Finally, the seventh section concludes with a summary of the key findings of the thesis, followed by the study limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

2.1 Overview

Since the end of the colonial era, the regional level of security has become more independent and more prominent in international politics. This trend became more pronounced after the Cold War, as the Great Powers became less inclined to interfere in security affairs outside their regions. Accordingly, the Copenhagen School has developed the RSCT, which focuses primarily on examining security dynamics from a regional perspective while not neglecting other levels of analysis (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 3-5).

The RSCT is a conceptual framework for analysing the regional level as a standalone subsystem, which was originally sketched by Buzan (1983) and, later on, reformulated by Buzan and Wæver (2003). The RSCT allows for a systematic connection between the study of internal conditions, RSC unit relations, inter-regional linkages, and the interplay of regional dynamics with global powers. These four levels of analysis constitute the so-called 'Security Constellation' (see Table 1). The RSCT's analytical power arises from the regionalist approach which includes a distinct level of analysis located between global and local levels (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 27). Buzan and Wæver (2003, pp. 29, 43) argue that the RSCT's essential idea is that security dynamics have strong territoriality; therefore, security studies should be conducted from a regional rather than national perspective. Thus, the framework formulated by the Copenhagen School provides a conceptual tool for analysing regional security in the context of contemporary international relations, which enables scholars to assess, predict and explain developments within any region (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 40).

Table 1: Security Constellation (the RSCT Levels of Analysis)

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Source: (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 12, 51)

The RSCT's main assumption is that the processes of (de)securitisation[2] of a set of units within a local RSC are interconnected. Since security dynamics are relational, security problems cannot be analysed or resolved in isolation of one another (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 44). Moreover, the RSCs can be "defined by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security inter-dependence" (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 45). Accordingly, the RSC is affected by patterns of amity and enmity, whereby each pattern is influenced by the historical factors or cultural embrace of the civilisational area. Thus, the RSCT has constructivist roots. Furthermore, the RSC is formed by the interaction between an anarchic international structure and the consequences of the balance of power on the one hand, and the pressures of local geographical dynamics on the other. The RSCT is somewhat compatible with a neorealist perspective on system structure, however, its constructivist dimension and regional focus place it outside of a neorealist approach (see Table 2). Moreover, a regionalist perspective differs from that of globalist when the latter begins to emphasise de-territorialisation. Since "most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones", the logic of territoriality continues to function strongly (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 12). This rule can be bypassed when (1) the nature of threats shifts from more territorialised (e.g., military) to less territorialised (e.g., economic and environmental), and (2) the absolute power of regional actors grows, enabling them to overcome barriers of distance (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 11-2, 44-6).

Table 2: The RSCT's Four Variables

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Source: (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 53)

[2] Securitisation is a process of moving issues from their normal status (e.g., religious and identity concerns) to a state of extreme emergency that requires exceptional measures. By contrast, de-securitisation is a process of shifting matters from emergency classification to normal bargaining processes in the political sphere (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, pp. 23-6).

2.2 Regional Dynamics of RSCs and Penetration Mechanisms

The RSCT tends to favour the regional level of analysis, however, it does not neglect the role of the global level on regional security dynamics. Global powers have wide-ranging interests and enormous capabilities that enable them to ignore the barrier of distances. Great powers can be involved when securitisation processes define *threats* as arising from the RSC (i.e., Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD), nuclear weapons, terrorism) or when referent objects to be secured are regional (i.e., oil supplies or vital waterways) (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 35, 46). For example, the stated motivation of the US to wage war against Iraq was to eliminate WMD. Another example is China's militarisation in Djibouti, which can be interpreted as protecting waterways through which enormous quantities of its exports pass. Moreover, the penetration mechanism is what connects the overarching pattern of distribution of power among global powers to the regional dynamics of RSCs (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 46). Many of RSC securitisation concerns such as self-determination, sovereignty, the balance of power, and amity and enmity patterns have encouraged regional states to 'call in outside help' (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 12, 46, 52). As an illustration, the interrelationship of local patterns of rivalry with global ones can be observed in the case of the Syrian civil war and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. As Buzan and Wæver (2003, p. 52) argued, "regional patterns of conflict shape the lines of intervention by global level powers ... the expectation is that outside powers will be drawn into a region along the lines of rivalry existing within it. In this way, regional patterns of rivalry may line up with, and be reinforced by, global power ones." In short, RSC is an autonomous geographical region with distinct regional dynamics that bind the security of its members together. Nevertheless, global powers will be involved whenever there is a relational relationship between local and global security patterns.

2.3 Defining Security and Securitisation

In the post-Cold War security order, proponents of the Copenhagen School emphasised the necessity of widening and deepening the concept of security studies beyond a traditional military-political perspective focused on interstate wars to include non-military sectors (i.e., political, societal, economic, and environmental) (Buzan 1991; 1997, pp. 13-7; Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, pp. 2-8). Buzan (1991, pp. 432-3) offers a reconceptualised definition of security; he argues that:

> "Security is taken to be about the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces

of change which they see as hostile. The bottom line of security is survival, but it also reasonably includes a substantial range of concerns about the conditions of existence"

Moreover, the securitisation approach is a process of labelling public issues in terms of (de)security rather than an objective feature of the problem or relationship itself. This classification should justify the appropriateness and repercussions of successfully (de)securitising the issue under consideration (Buzan 1997, p. 24). In this regard, Buzan (1997) identified three stages of public issue securitisation, ranging from the non-politicised through politicised to securitised (see Figure 1). A security problem is framed when a particular referent object (state, economy, identity) is presented as facing an existential threat that undermines its survival. Therefore, a securitising actor turns to 'extraordinary measures' to deal with security threats due to their unique nature. To *securitise* is to construct an intersubjective understanding within a political community to construct something as an existential threat against a valued referent object, allowing for the call for immediate and exceptional measures in response to that threat (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 491; Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, p. 21). In other words, "security is what actors make it" (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 48). As Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998, p. 23) state, "security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitisation can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicisation". Thus, security pretexts have legitimised the use of force and paved the way for the securitising actor, whether state or non-state, to mobilise or exercise extraordinary powers in response to existential threats.

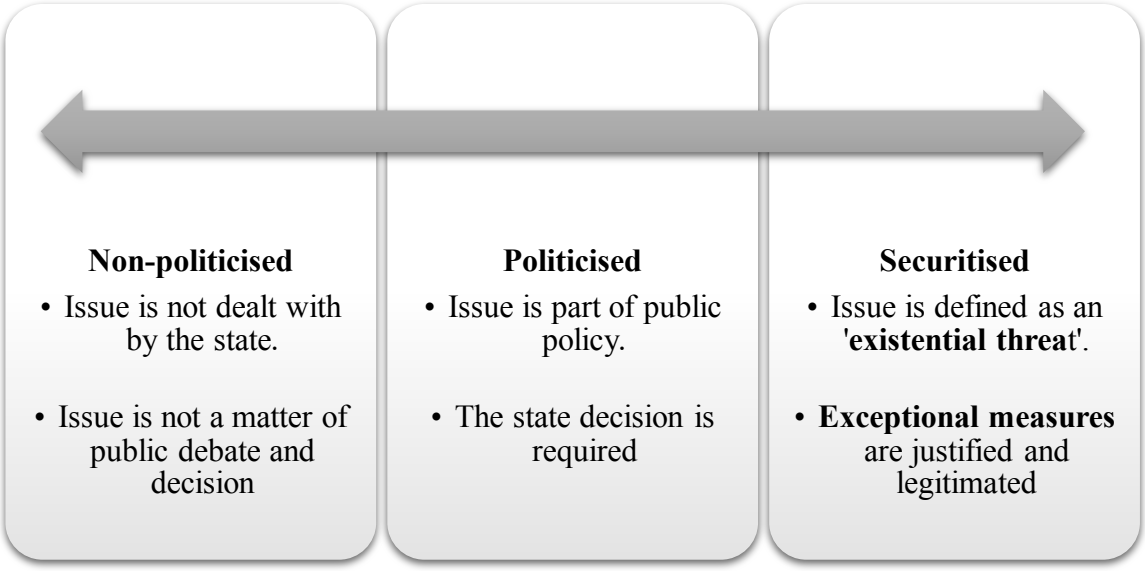

Figure 1: Spectrum of securitisation of public issues (Buzan 1997, pp. 13-5)

3. REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

3.1 Overview

The term *Middle East* first emerged on the international scene in 1902 by American captain Alfred Mahan (Davison 1960, p. 667). Although its meaning is still debated, the term Middle East was widely popularised only during the Cold War (Koch & Stivachtis 2019, p. 1). This term refers to a geographical area that mediates the continents of the ancient world, west from the Mediterranean Sea to Iran in the east (see Figure 2). From north to south, it runs from the Black Sea to the Arabian Sea (Marshall 2015, p. 122).

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Figure 2: Map of the Middle East (Library of Congress 2010)

Within the Middle East, the Persian Gulf has emerged as a pivotal region because of the geopolitical and economic importance of its vast oil resources to the global economic order (Shayan 2017, p. 3). It should be noted that even the naming of the region has been the subject of a wide dispute between the Persian and Arab camps since the 1960s. Arab nationalists demand the region be referred to as the Arabian Gulf, while Iran insists on naming the region the Persian Gulf (Levinson 2011; Zraick 2016). Therefore, in this study, the Persian Gulf will be adopted as the name used to refer to a geographical area consisting of the GCC and non-GCC states, which comprise Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, and Iran (see Figure 3).

Figure has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.

Figure 3: Map showing the Persian Gulf states (Central Intelligence Agency n.d.-a)

The MERSC region can be defined as an area composed of a group of states where key security issues overlap to the extent that their national security concerns cannot be resolved separately. Three regional subcomplexes have been developed within the MERSC, which Turkey and Afghanistan are helping to isolate from neighbouring security complexes in Europe and South Asia, respectively (Figure 4). These three subcomplexes have been classified into two major ones in the Levant and the Gulf and a much weaker one in the Maghreb (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 188).

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Figure 4: The Middle Eastern RSC (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 189)

3.2 The Security Constellation of the Middle East

It is no exaggeration to say that the history of the MERSC is one of conflict, rivalry, and controversy among the Great Powers. In the past, most of the countries in the region had been subjected to Western colonialism except for Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, which means that Western powers had a role in mapping the political boundaries of the modern Middle East (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 187). However, despite the ongoing and heavy constraints of the global level, the security interplay between domestic and regional levels has had its own distinctive imprint. In the post-colonial era, regional patterns[3] of conflict in the Levant subcomplex had dominated the entire geopolitical scene of the MERSC, prompting regional units to interact with these patterns to varying degrees. As for the global powers, the Cold War patterns, along with the regional competition of their clients, had dragged them to penetrate the MERSC, which was the third front in the Cold War.

[3] i.e., Self-determination, sovereignty, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, anti-Western, and anti-Zionism.

However, the fading of Nasserism and the proclamation of Egyptian-Israeli peace on the one hand, and the dawning of the Khomeinist revolution, growing Saddam's ambitions, and Arab-Gulf countermeasures on the other, have made the Gulf subcomplex a pivotal region in the MERSC. Thus, the successive developments that the Gulf subcomplex has witnessed since the late 1970s have had a significant impact on the security dynamics in the MERSC as a whole. As such, the focus of this study is the Gulf subcomplex as a *core* and the rest of the MERSC as a *periphery*. Accordingly, with the Inter-regional level being excluded due to limited interaction, the security dynamic interactions at the local, regional, and global levels are examined to enable a grasp of a descriptive picture of the *security constellation* in the MERSC.

3.2.1 The domestic level

The MERSC generally consists of modern states, although its structural content is still full of pre-modern elements. State interacts with security dynamics based on the degree of cohesion between civil society and government institutions. Based on the *degree of stateness*, the MERSC states are toward the weaker end of the spectrum of weak and strong states[4]; thus, socio-political cohesion is almost non-existent. Moreover, civil societies in the MERSC have long been subject to varying levels of political and social violence. Democracy is non-existent, while dictatorship and authoritarian regimes are the dominant political systems (see Figure 5). According to a report issued by Freedom House (2018, p. 1219), the Middle East has scored the worst civil liberties in the world.

Moreover, weak states lack a coherent national identity or suffer from competing minorities identities within their territories. In Iran, Persian identity has been imposed as an all-inclusive Iranian identity for all ethnic groups, rather than seeking a comprehensive identity that preserves ethnic minority rights to citizenship. Furthermore, non-Persian identities have been securitised and thus described as 'manufactured ethnic identities' and 'politicised identities' (Soleimani & Mohammadpour 2019, p. 925). Furthermore, politics in weak states tend to revolve around 'survival strategies' (Hashemi & Postel 2017, p. 6). In the Arab political sphere, the state tends to maximise its authoritarian power in return for weakening civil society, given its awareness of internal rejection that has always been considered an existential threat. The state, as an entity, has not adopted integrative policies for its social components; instead, its rationality tends toward deconstruction, fragmentation, and investment in the politics of imagined identity (Mezrag & Draghi 2020, pp. 12,5).

[4] The stronger states are internally socio-political coherent, and thus their threat is external; weaker states lack much socio-political coherence, and thus their threat stems from within (e.g., non-state actors), making them often vulnerable to outside threats; state failure is the extreme result of this weakness (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 22-5).

In the absence of transparency and accountability, it is not surprising that corruption, faltering development, exacerbating poverty, and fragile states are amongst the lasting consequences (see Figure 6 and Figure 7).

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Figure 5: Democracy Index 2020, Middle Eastern map by regime type (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020)

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Figure 6: Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 (Transparency International 2020)

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Figure 7: Fragile States Index in the Middle East (Fund for Peace 2021)

In the Arab world, transnational Islamists have represented opposition movements in many countries in the region. In the post-colonial era, the discourses of Arab nationalism, anti-Zionism, anti-Westernism espoused by Gamal Abdel-Nasser and Saddam Hussein had struggled to mobilise the Arab street towards a collective Arab identity. However, neither the Islamists have been able to build wide political coalitions within or between regional countries, nor have the Arab nationalists discourse been able to dismantle the national identity (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 194-7). As Buzan and Wæver (2003, p. 186) argue, "pan-regional identity movements failed to override the Westphalian transplant". Therefore, it can be said that a well-established system of sovereign states has served as an impenetrable bulwark in the face of pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiments.

Additionally, Islamic sectarian divisions have been among the most crucial factors affecting the security of the ruling political elites. The Sunni-Shiite conflict that erupted after the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) and exacerbated after the fall of Baghdad (2003) has played a decisive role in political mobilisation. Differences in beliefs and historical memory have pushed the Sunni and Shiite camps to politicise religious identity intensively. For example, Saudi-led Sunni rhetoric has focused on undermining the power and appeal of the Iranian Revolution. It was depicted as a Shia/Iranian phenomenon seeking to pervert the Islamic tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (Hashemi & Postel 2017, pp. 4-6). On the other side of the Gulf, the Iranian-led Shiite discourse has emphasised the necessity to champion the vulnerable in the Muslim world (Islamic Republic of Iran 1979, pp. 12, 37). Thus, Iran has portrayed itself as an Islamic identity protector (Nia 2012, pp. 39-40). The patterns of this historic conflict have been clearly reflected in regional security dynamics

since the fall of Baghdad (2003). Since then, both Iran and Saudi-led GCC have remarkably rushed to sustain and strengthen their sect.

The interplay between local and regional levels became apparent when the Middle East governments were widely involved in supporting domestic factions in other countries. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) received varying military and financial support from some Arab regimes, which threatened Israeli security. Furthermore, post-revolutionary Iran backed extremist movements, while Saudi Arabia supported Islamic and conservative movements. Their bias can be seen in many intrastate conflicts in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. More importantly, Arab fighters returning from Afghanistan became the nucleus of so-called al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups like ISIS, which subsequently played a key role in domestic, regional and global security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 196-7). Thus, it can be argued that the tendency of regional actors to engage intensively in regional security dynamics was driven by their internal insecurity. Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Arab regimes had to prove to conservative public opinion their support for the liberation of Palestine. In short, the survival of regional regimes at home has been associated with flexibility and affordability in dealing with changing regional security dynamics.

3.2.2 The regional level

The MERSC began to take shape at the end of World War II. Since then, the process of decolonisation, completed with the British exit from the Persian Gulf in 1971, had left a critical mass of independent states with overlapping and complex security concerns. Moreover, many of the MERSC's current conflict dynamics have historical origins that can be traced back to the interwar years. The most important rivalries between the Arabs were the Yemeni-Saudi conflict over the demarcation of political borders (1920s), the Egyptian-Iraqi struggle over the Arab world's leadership and interpretations of Arabism. As for the conflict between Arabs and non-Arabs, it was clearly represented by domestic conflict between Palestinians and Zionist immigrants (1930s), which took on a regional dimension. In addition, it is important to realise that there have been historical conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites since the seventh century, the Ottoman coloniser and the Arabs (which continues to manifest itself in a number of Kurdish conflicts), and between the Ottoman and Persian empires (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 187-8). Given this historical background, it is not surprising that the MERSC 'was born fighting' (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 188).

Since its independence, MERSC has been more complicated in terms of the distribution of power. To a large extent, it contained a group of countries relatively equal in weight (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 188). Given the wide geography and intertwined security interactions, the Levant and the Gulf security subcomplexes have emerged as the main focus of security studies because of the entanglement between their security dynamics. In contrast, the Maghreb subcomplex has moved away from Arab issues and over time became more independent (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 213). Accordingly, the focus of this study is on the two core subcomplexes in the Levant and the Gulf in an effort to understand each other's historical security dynamics and the extent to which their security issues overlap with each other.

3.2.2.1 The Levant subcomplex

The Levant subcomplex has always been a hotspot that has attracted actors from and beyond its geographical borders. Since 1945, despite the domestic dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflict has been Arabised and Islamised, giving it a regional dimension. In the first Arab-Israeli war (1948), King Farouk chose to engage in the war because of the pressure of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood at home[5], and a shared fear with Syrian leaders that the Hashemite Kings of Transjordan and Iraq would strengthen their sphere of influence in the Arab world if they remained standing idly by (Ovendale 2004, p. 137). Thus, although it was an attempt to unite the Arab world, it failed due to the strong imprint of the security dilemma between the Arab parties.

The Arab setbacks in the 1948 war led to the emergence of so-called *al-Qawmiya al-Arabiya* (Arab nationalism) in response to Zionism. The collective Arab identity was intended to de-emphasise statism in favour of pan-Arabism (Dakhlallah 2012, pp. 399-400). In the mid-1950s, Arab nationalist anti-Zionist and anti-Western discourses emerged with the rise of Arab socialism under the banner of Nasser. Indeed, Egypt was the obvious leader of the Arab world due to its wealth, size, population, and religious and intellectual capabilities (Ovendale 2004, p. 151). This decade witnessed the Suez–Sinai War between Egypt and Israel (1956) due to the former's assertions on its sovereignty and socialism, and the latter's uncertainty about Nasser's intentions. Major Israeli concerns centred on the economic slowdown caused by the Arab boycott due to the closure of the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba, increased Soviet arms deals to Egypt and Syria, the Egyptian-Syrian military alliance, and Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal (Bickerton & Klausner 2016, pp. 139-42).

[5] The establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 followed the deep ideological crisis within the Muslim world after the caliphate's dissolution following the fall of the Islamic Ottoman Empire in 1925 (Munson 2001, pp. 488-490).

Therefore, Israel had to ensure its survival by demonstrating its power to the Nasser regime (Fraser 1980, p. 82).

The roots of the 1967 Six-Day War arose from the border clashes between the new Syrian regime that supported the PLO and Israel. In addition, Syria and Jordan's repeatedly condemned the 'Arab hero' who was in conflict with Saudi Arabia over Yemen for not playing any role against Zionism. Accordingly, and based on Soviet disinformation, Nasser militarised Sinai and closed the Gulf of Aqaba to confront Israel and settle Palestinian rights. However, this war led to another significant setback for Arabs as Israel occupied Arab territories in Syria, Egypt, and Jordan (Fraser 1980, pp. 97-8; Ovendale 2004, pp. 204-8). Moreover, the 1970s saw the fourth Arab-Israeli War, which attracted Arab parties from outside the Levant subcomplex. The exorbitant costs of the Saudi-Egypt proxy war in Yemen (1962-1967) and the humiliating defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, which placed the offshore oil fields and Sinai in Israeli hands, posed fateful domestic challenges to Anwar Sadat's regime (Ovendale 2004, pp. 219-25).

With the failure of Nasserism and the decline of pan-Arabism, Sadat had to adopt a more pragmatic approach that would enable the Arabs to get out of their 'moral crisis'. Indeed, "the conflict with Israel was no longer about its legitimacy but about its boundaries" (Dakhlallah 2012, p. 403). In other words, the priorities of Egypt, Syria and Jordan shifted from the liberation of Palestine to the liberation of its territories from the Israeli occupation. Thus, the Arab countries supported Egypt financially and militarily, and the oil-producing countries used oil as a weapon to put pressure on international actors (Ovendale 2004, pp. 219-25). Since then, the Arab-Israeli conflict has seen a breakthrough after Sadat pursued a separate peace with Israel (1979), which made Egypt the subject of widespread criticism from moderate and radical Arabs (Ovendale 2004, p. 240). Indeed, the power vacuum left by Egypt's decline created fierce competition between Saudi Arabia and Iraq over the Arab world's leadership. Overall, it can be said that the failure of Arab nationalism and the preponderance of the Westphalian state system were the most prominent outcomes throughout this era.

3.2.2.2 The Gulf subcomplex

The Gulf subcomplex has been a focus of the complicated conflicts since the departure of the British in the early 1970s (Smith 2019, pp. 28-30). Despite its independent local dynamics, there has been a crossover with the dynamics of the Levant subcomplex (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 193).

Accordingly, this section includes a systematic review of the three Gulf wars, and the Arab Spring and aftermath.

During the first Gulf War, in the 1980s, the Iraqi Ba'athist regime played the role of 'balancer' between a revisionist revolutionary Islamic theocracy and those in favour of the status quo (Indyk 1991, p. 34). Except for its archrival Syria, many regional states had aligned themselves with Saddam Hussein, such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Ramazani 1990, pp. 44, 6). The conservative GCC states supported the anti-Iran balance of power to contain an opposing revolutionary threat to their ideologies (Indyk 1991, p. 34). For the Gulf states, there is no alternative approach to dealing with the revolutionary threat because Tehran's victory would be an incentive for it to export its nascent revolution (Lorenzo 2021, p. 198; Ulrichsen 2012, pp. 113-4). By contrast, Iran fought the war in acute isolation and with economic difficulties (Segal 1988, pp. 952, 61-62). The aftermath of the war has had an impact on Iran's foreign policy. By emphasising the concept of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, the Islamic revolutionaries realised that their regime's survival is solely dependent on their own efforts (Takeyh 2010, p. 383). Thus, Tehran's foreign policy has shifted from being pro-Western to being summed up by the slogan "Neither East nor West" (Behrooz 1990, p. 13). Consequently, a revisionist foreign policy has been adopted, aimed at altering "the regional balance of power in its own favour at the expense of the US and its allies" (Arafat 2020, p. 99).

In the early 1990s, a regional crisis erupted between Iraq and Kuwait because of their disagreement over the price of a barrel of oil, leading to the Second Gulf War (Lorenzo 2021, p. 198) (see Figure 8). Regionally, rather than seeking a common consensus that would ease tensions between conflicting parties, Arab political positions were divided between supporters and opponents of the Iraqi occupation (Salih 2019, p. 126). It can be argued that Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and divergent Arab political stances have hammered the last nail in the coffin of so-called Arab nationalism. Remarkably, the Second Gulf War has had significant implications on the basic structures of the Middle East's RSC as a whole and in the Gulf subcomplex in particular. Among these repercussions were (1) weakening Iraq's role, which led to a change in the distribution of power logic; (2) strengthening the US presence in the GCC states, which made them more dependent on Washington's security umbrella; (3) and paving the way for peace processes between Israel on the one hand and Syria, Jordan, and the PLO on the other (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 201).

Figure has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.

Figure 8: Persian Gulf War, 1991 (Maps.com 1999)

In the post-Third Gulf War (2003), the post-Saddam Middle East pushed regional powers to compete to fill the power vacuum and seek a regional balance of power that serves their national interests (Wehrey et al. 2009b, p. 1). It can be argued that Iran was the main beneficiary of the 9/11 attacks. In its wake, Washington eliminated two of Iran's most powerful regional opponents, in the east, when the US toppled the Taliban regime, and in the west, when it destroyed Iraq's military capabilities, which had been considered the most prominent strategic threat to Iran, and the obstacle that prevented the expansion of its regional influence in the West. According to Walt (2018, p. 36), "toppling Saddam Hussein in Iraq removed a key counterbalance to Iranian influence and greatly enhanced Iran's position in the Persian Gulf region."

It is important to realise that the Sunni Arabs' fears of Iran over the past two decades have somewhat bolstered regional support for Saudi's securitisations activism in the region. Yet, the spectre of growing Iranian influence reinforced by its nuclear ambitions and resulting Saudi assertiveness[6] have intensified inter-Arab discussions amongst the Gulf states and the Levant over regional hierarchy, sovereignty, and the degree of compatibility allowed with Tehran. From the perspective

[6] Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said, "we will enter nuclear arms race if Iran does … if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we would follow suit as soon as possible" (CBS 2018).

of the small Gulf states (i.e., Qatar and Oman) (Wehrey et al. 2009a, p. 45), "Riyadh's new activism may be equally as alarming as the threat from Iran itself" (Wehrey et al. 2009b, p. 5). Thus, cautiously, each has systematically sought to adopt an independent, seemingly paradoxical, foreign policy to carve out a sovereign niche in Gulf affairs (Wehrey et al. 2009b, pp. 48-51).

3.2.2.3 The Arab Uprisings and aftermath

Although insulators often play a marginal role in the security dynamics of surrounding RSCs (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 41, 394), Turkey seems to challenge this thesis (Barrinha 2014, p. 166). Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has focused on building its internal nation, which enabled it to sit on the sidelines during World War II. To contain the Soviet threat, Turkey joined NATO. However, despite its aspirations, it has not been able to join the European Union. After the Second Gulf War, Ankara has demonstrated an active interaction in the Middle East securitisation processes, such as the Kurds issue in Iraq and Syria (Barrinha 2014, pp. 170-4). In the post-Arab Spring period, Turkey's role in embracing the Muslim Brotherhood was evident, leading to a clash with the conservative Sunni bloc on many regional security agendas (Göksel 2018, pp. 1-7). Thus, it seems that Turkey has found a foothold to expand its sphere of influence as a result of the power imbalances in the Middle East.

The historical division within the Sunni House has played a key role in many internal and regional securitisation processes. In conjunction with the Arab Uprisings and the control of the Muslim Brotherhood movements over the political process in Tunisia and Egypt, two contradictory securitisation discourses appeared. The first was adopted by the Saudi-led Sunni status quo bloc, which described the group "as a terrorist organisation that does not represent Islam" (Arafat 2020, p. 121). Accordingly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have triggered counter-revolutions in many countries in the region (Arafat 2020, p. 134). In contrast, Turkey-Qatar-led Sunni revisionist bloc discourse committed to supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, this was among the main reasons that led to the Gulf Crisis 2017-2021 (The Blockade of Qatar) and the crisis of Saudi-Turkish relations (Arafat 2020, p. 182).

3.2.3 The global level

With the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the dramatic decline of British colonialism, the Middle East had become one of the arenas of competition and understanding amongst the US and the Soviet Union (Lüthi 2020c, p. 42). Since the Middle East lies on the "boundary between the spheres of the

communist and free worlds", it became the third front of the Cold War, especially when British and French influence declined after the Suez Crisis (Buzan & Wæver 2003, pp. 197-8). Indeed, Washington was drawn to the region to fill the void left by the retreat of these powers.

In the Zionist-Arab conflict (1947-1973), which was punctuated by four major wars, the US and Soviet Union had had a diverging position on the matter (Lüthi 2020b, p. 186). In 1947, the Soviet Union and the US endorsed the UN partition proposal and recognised Israel's independence. However, each maintained its distance in the aftermath. Both viewed Israel to be the aggressor during the 1956 Suez Crisis and worked cooperatively in the UN to restore the status quo ante. (Lüthi 2020a, p. 189). In the 1967 and 1973 wars, as the dynamics of the Cold War accelerated, the Soviet Union preferred to align with the Arab side while the US preferred to back the Israeli ally (Lüthi 2020c, p. 42). Through its opportunistic diplomacy, the Kremlin had exploited two main factors to expand its influence in the region. One is the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the other is the inter-Arab disputes. Accordingly, Syria and Egypt had been fertile grounds for expanding its sphere of influence through arms sales and political support (Campbell 1972, pp. 126, 33). As for Washington, the Arab-Israeli peace has long been a critical component, however, not the only consideration of its regional objectives, which have remained defined by four principles: containing Soviet influence while maximising its own; promoting regional stability; supporting and strengthening allies; and ensuring the continued supply of oil at reasonable prices (Rubin 1985, p. 583).

With the decline of Soviet influence in the region after the 1973 war, US policymakers found challenges in reconciling contradictory US commitments. Washington's commitment to Israel's security has often contradicted the positions of Arab and Islamic countries. Besides, its crude oil needs demanded pragmatic relations with the Arab Gulf states, Iran, and Iraq. For instance, the 1970s oil crisis, with its consequences for the stability of the entire Western political economy, reinforced American engagement in the region. Thus, despite being the region's main outside player, the US has had no coherent Middle East policy. Nevertheless, Washington, with its huge material power and enormous wealth, has managed to maintain its interests despite these contradictions (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 199).

In the Persian Gulf subcomplex, the Nixon Doctrine had adopted an offshore balancing approach (light military presence, 1970-1990) to maintain stability and protect the US vital interests. In essence, the 'twin pillars' (Iran and Saudi Arabia) were relied upon to achieve this end (Arafat 2020,

pp. 25, 35). However, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in 1979, followed by the GCC (1981) as a countermeasure, has changed the geopolitical landscape of the Persian Gulf.

Moreover, given the existential threats posed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its potential repercussions on energy security, the US asserted its firm stance against Soviet expansion in what became known as the Carter Doctrine. President Jimmy Carter (1980) stated, "let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force". To deter Soviet expansion, the Afghan Mujahideen had been financially and militarily reinforced by several countries, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, and Iran (Feifer 2009, pp. 98, 131, 218). Nevertheless, with the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, the al-Qaeda terrorist network was formed by Osama bin Laden in search of 'holy wars' (BBC 2008).

The period (1991-2010) witnessed a fundamental shift from the 'offshore balancing' approach to the 'onshore balancing' approach (strong military presence) (Arafat 2020, pp. 36-7). The defeat of Iraq in 1991 had a greater impact on Gulf developments than the fall of the Soviet Union because it altered the character of global intervention and the distribution of power at the regional level (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 203). Given the regional failure to contain the crisis that threatened global energy security, it was necessary to reach an international consensus that would discourage Iraq's ambitions. Moreover, from a sole power perspective, this was the first empirical test to demonstrate its leadership of the post-Cold War order. Therefore, it was important to deter dictatorial leaders, preserve the sovereignty of states and consolidate international norms and charters (Lorenzo 2021, pp. 200-1). In an address to the nation from the Whitehouse at the launch of Desert Storm First Gulf War operation of 1991 against Sadam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq and invasion of Kuwait (Collins 2019), President George H. W. Bush (1991) emphasised that this military action would be the basis for:

> "…a new world order - a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations. When we are successful - and we will be - we have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision of the U.N.'s founders."

After the Second Gulf War, the US reverted to the 'offshore balancing' approach in which the Clinton administration adopted a policy of 'Dual Containment' to deal with Iran and Iraq threats (NSS 1994, p. 25). Therefore, its premise was to keep these countries surrounded by economic sanctions and military monitoring, while its strategic objective was "to maintain a de facto balance of power between Iraq and Iran so that neither would be able to achieve a regional hegemony that might threaten American interests" (Brzezinski, Scowcroft & Murphy 1997, pp. 2-3). Moreover, in the post-Cold War, weak or failed states have become the main challenge to the security and stability of the international system (Fukuyama 2004, p. 92). Afghanistan, as a good example of a 'weak' and 'fragile' state, has been a 'safe haven' for terrorist jihadist groups (National Strategy for Combating Terrorism 2003, p. 7; Newman 2007, pp. 467-8). Thus, given al-Qaida's growing capabilities, which enabled it to cross the geography barrier and attack American territory in the 9/11 attacks and threaten its regional presence, it was necessary to eradicate terrorism roots in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The post-Arab Spring geopolitical developments (2011 to present) have cast a shadow over the regional landscape of the Persian Gulf. Regionally, these developments have made those who favour the status quo more vulnerable to the preferences of revisionist powers. This period has emphasised Washington's Pivot to Asia policy. Thus, emphasis has been placed on the transition from the onshore to offshore balancing approach (semi-light military presence) (Arafat 2020, pp. 25, 36-7). Besides, this period saw an increased China interest in the region, though Beijing's presence has been inconsistent. Ranging from Washington's non-interventionism to China's ambiguity, it can be said that the Persian Gulf is witnessing a new phase of geopolitical shifts in which the US will not be the only key player.

3.2.3.1 Washington's non-interventionism

A number of authors have argued that Washington's non-interventionism approach has been evident since 2011 (Black 2012). In the Arab Spring, Washington's responses mixed pragmatism with values. In Egypt, Obama's administration was criticised for backing the regimes' stability, prompting it to call on Mubarak to step down 'now' (Black 2012). Subsequently, most of the Arab Gulf states did not hesitate to take a decisive role in crushing the democratic protests in Bahrain (Cooper & Worth 2012). Moreover, in view of Iran's nuclear ambitions, Walt (2019, p. 3) asserts that austerity in US military commitments will have destabilising consequences in the Middle East. States such as Saudi Arabia are very likely to acquire nuclear weapons as a means of a deterrent to

maintain the regional balance of power in its favour. Moreover, the US has long been committed to protecting the Gulf's oil resources from global and regional threats; however, its commitment appears to be waning. Since 2017, with President Donald Trump's maximum pressure policy, Tehran has attacked many oil tankers in the Gulf and threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz more than once. More importantly, the Abqaiq and Kharias oil facilities in Saudi Arabia were targeted by Iranian drones and cruise missiles. However, the Trump administration took no decisive action, thereby undermining the basic principle of the Carter Doctrine toward the Persian Gulf (Brands, Cook & Pollack 2019). Instead, Washington has recently restricted arms sales, reduced its military presence, and withdrawn the Patriot Defence System (Kheel 2021; Lubold, Youssef & Gordon 2021; Ng 2021).

The rationale for this disengagement is that the Middle East is no longer a *vital* interest of Washington (Goldberg 2016, pp. 82-4). Accordingly, Blagden and Porter (2021, p. 5) argue that the Persian Gulf and its regional surroundings have become increasingly *peripheral* to US national interests. Given its strategic weight, the region accounts for only 6% of global GDP and only 5% of the world's population. Thus, America's Middle Eastern commitment not only 'brings fewer benefits for a higher price than Western Europe and East Asia, but it also carries heavy opportunity costs, to the detriment of those more important and favourable theatres' (Blagden & Porter 2021, pp. 20, 46). In short, given the shift in the US geopolitical outlook, it seems that the regional actors should adjust their foreign policies in line with current geopolitical changes to find a middle ground to resolve their differences (Goldberg 2016, p. 84).

3.2.3.2 Chinese ambiguity

Beijing has been able to navigate 'three-level games' using 'strategic ambiguity'[7] and hedging to do so (Burton 2021, pp. 12-5). Globally, there is a convergence and divergence between China's objectives and those of other Great Powers. While they support regional stability and nuclear arms control, China sees the US support for liberal democracy and individual rights as a threat to its ideology. In Syria, China adhered to supporting authoritarian elites for selfish geopolitical objectives. Ghiselli and Giuffrida (2020, p. 14) argued that Beijing has adopted an offshore balancing strategy that aims to undermine the US position in the region. To this end, various

[7] Strategic ambiguity (hedging) refers to the lack of an unambiguous preference for one country or a set of states over another. Because power is more dispersed in the multipolar system than in unipolar or bipolar ones, strategic ambiguity is more likely to reduce policy failure risks. Hedging neither means balancing nor bandwagoning. Rather, it is "an insurance-seeking behaviour under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers" (Burton 2021, pp. 12-15).

diplomatic and economic means have been used to "ensure the survival of regimes that are not pro-West and avoiding the establishment of ones that may be" (Burton 2021, pp. 2-8). Notwithstanding, this trend has benefited Iran at the expense of countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The regional level considers existing tensions between regional adversaries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Since these countries have the region's largest economies and armed forces, they are the countries with whom China's regional ties are mostly concerned. For example, Beijing played a key role in mediating between Western powers and Tehran to reach an agreement on the latter's nuclear program. However, this role was embarrassing for China, given the opposition of some GCC states and Israel to such an agreement (Burton 2021, pp. 2-8).

Finally, the sub-regional level includes those countries that are vulnerable to the influence of regional powers. On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, China has preferred lucrative financial and commercial relations with Israel over its long historical sympathies with the Palestinians. In post-2003 Iraq, Beijing consolidated its influence with Shiite-majority political leaders, and its companies became involved in the energy sector. Nevertheless, it had no role in the multinational coalition committed to defeating ISIS. In Yemen, Beijing is adopting a double standard approach. On the one hand, it backs the Yemeni government and provides Saudi Arabia with drones. On the other, it has occasional contact with the Houthi rebels, believing it has a role to play in any peace process. (Burton 2021, pp. 8-11).

Given these points, this strategic ambiguity approach has enabled Beijing not to take sides at the expense of the other, thus enabling it to emphasise its long-term commitment to the principle of non-interference in the affairs of others. Several reasons contributed to the success of this approach: (1) the US long-standing commitment to regional security; (2) the dispersed nature of power among regional powers (Burton 2021, pp. 12-5). Indeed, China's approach to the region is hollow, vague, fickle at the stage, rather than being concrete, clear, and consistent. From the Beijing perspective, despite the economic and strategic importance of the Middle East, regional instability and significant political risks in the East prevent Beijing from focusing too much on the Middle East. Thus, many Chinese scholars emphasise that Beijing 'should avoid paying too much attention to the region and being dragged into the Middle Eastern quagmire as the US was' (Zhang & Xiao 2021, pp. 274, 7).

4. SINO-AMERICAN SECURITY OBJECTIVES AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

4.1 A Historical View of the International Order

International system building has passed through 'great historical moments', which come after 'major wars'. Each moment was marked by the rise and decline of Great Powers, as well as its principles and standards that privileged winner(s), while structural anarchy remained the dominant feature (Ikenberry 2001, pp. 3-7). In 1648, the Peace of Westphalia treaty laid the primitive foundations for establishing the modern international order. Thus, its principles and rules emphasised the state's sovereignty power over its territory. In other words, it was based on a system of autonomous nations refraining from interfering in each other's domestic affairs and checking each other's aspirations through a general equilibrium of power (Kissinger 2014, pp. 1-8). In a multipolar system that had dominated the international stage until the end of World War II, the principle of the old style of balance-of-power politics prevailed. Five Great Powers were closely equal, which restricted freedom of decision-making and exercise control by any individual force (Waltz 1988, pp. 620-2).

In a bipolar world, the ideological and political conflict between the Soviet-led Communist order and the US-led Liberal International Order had taken far-reaching shifts in the international distribution of power. These transformations led to the launching of new socio-political forces and the reorganisation of diplomatic relations globally (Gilpin 1981, pp. 1-2,238). Contradictions among the Soviets' Marxist-Leninist ideology and capitalism, as well as a feeling of insecurity, led to Soviet expansion. Moscow emphasised the imperative of standing up to democracy and capitalism in order for its ideology to triumph. Therefore, it sought to consolidate its ideology in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East (Kennan 1947, p. 567; Westad 2019, p. 86). In contrast, the US-led Cold War framework sought to promote regional states' interests and protect them from communist influence (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 198). After all, despite disagreements over the post-World War II balance of power, ideological clashes, and arms races, the Soviet-American conflict transformed itself into a long peace because the two nuclear poles preferred to bet on time rather than entrapment in a third World War (Brands & Gaddis 2021, pp. 15-6).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the so-called 'New International Order' first appeared during the Persian Gulf crisis in the US's National Security Strategy (NSS 1991). This period required Washington policymakers to reconsider US national security by identifying interests and objectives, the nature of the threats to those interests and objectives, and the appropriate

response mechanism to those threats. Thus, four competing strategies[8] emerged about the role US should play in the world (Posen & Ross 1996, p. 5).

- *Neo-Isolationism*- It is the least ambitious and least popular among its peers. Because of their narrow perspective of US national interests, the neo-isolationists see internationalism as counterproductive. Due to that US geography and nuclear deterrence, neo-isolationists claimed that neither a state in the East nor the West could threaten American interests. Therefore, protecting the American people's security, liberty, and property is the only US vital interest. The neo-isolationists, therefore, de-emphasise intervening in political disputes around the world because it would attract attention to the US. Engaging in international politics imposes clear burdens and risks. However, relinquishing an active role in international politics would increase the risks and reduce the US ability to manage their consequences (Posen & Ross 1996, pp. 9-16).

- *Cooperative Security*- Its advocates emphasise that world peace is effectively indivisible. In contrast to the four strategies, cooperative security is guided by liberalism. Democratic peace, liberal institutionalism, and economic liberalism can overcome the shortcomings of traditional collective security. Global interdependence facilitates international cooperation to deter and thwart aggression (Posen & Ross 1996, pp. 23-31). This strategy was based on controlling the offensive use of force, enhancing collective security, economic openness, and strengthening the cooperation amongst Great Powers under international institutions' umbrella (Miller & Yetiv 2001, pp. 56-8,61).

- *Selective Engagement*- It seeks to ensure peace between the Great Powers and minimising their tendency to go to war with one another. Despite its geography, world wars that started in Eurasia have managed to reach out and drag US, despite its strong tendency to stay out. Moreover, selective engagement's advocates emphasise the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially among those who have conflicting interests with US. Thus, it is a *cautious* defence strategy aimed at protecting US vital interests globally at the lowest possible cost (Posen & Ross 1996, pp. 17-23).

[8] See Appendix A for a summary of the four competing US strategies.

- *Primacy*- It is motivated by both strength and peace, just like selective engagement. However, its advocates see that only a preponderance of US power ensures peace. Thus, its objective extends beyond maintaining peace among the Great Powers to maintaining US's political, economic, and military superiority over any global rival. In the post-Cold War era, the sole pole has enjoyed strategic and ideological predominance, enabling it to exercise hegemonic influence and authority over the international order. Like selective engagement's advocates, primacy's proponents argue that regional conflict is more important when it affects Great Power relations, the emergence of potential peer competitors, and regional hegemony (Posen & Ross 1996, pp. 32-42).

Notwithstanding, the selective engagement and primacy strategies have dominated US foreign policy. In the post-Cold War era, security threats have expanded from their narrow traditional military-political issues to non-military ones (Buzan 1997, p. 6). In addition to military threats, they included political, economic, social and environmental threats (Buzan 1997, p. 15). Accordingly, in the Second Gulf War, American security objectives extended beyond the liberation of Kuwait and supporting Gulf partners to maintain the credibility of its-led post-Cold War order. Once again, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and WMD considerations prompted US decisionmakers to engage in pre-emptive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Bush, GHW 1991; Bush, GW 2001a, 2001b; National Strategy for Combating Terrorism 2003, 2006). To consolidate its primacy in an era of renewed competition between Great Powers, American strategies have emphasised the need to protect the US-led free world from being influenced by revisionist authoritarian powers (Department of Defense 2018, p. 1). Thus, successive developments on the international scene since the end of the Cold War have forced American strategists to engage in a number of security issues in order to preserve international peace, and to emphasise US political, economic and military strength in order to sustain its primacy.

4.2 The Return of Geopolitics: A New Multipolar World

Francis Fukuyama (1989) argues in his article 'The end of history' that with the end of the Cold War, the ideological evolution of humanity ended. As an alternative, Western liberal democracy has been universalised as the ultimate form of human government (Fukuyama 1989, p. 1). In the absence of potential competitors, a hegemonic liberal international order has devoted its efforts to framing and dissemination of a free-trade order, Western lifestyle, values, and culture in many ways through

the mechanisms of globalisation (Mearsheimer 2019). Notwithstanding, the return of the Great Power competition is a definitive refutation of Fukuyama's thesis (Mead 2014, p. 78).

Buzan and Wæver (2003, pp. 10-2) maintained that the Great Powers in the post-Cold War have become 'lite powers.' However, that has not restricted rising China and resurgent Russia from challenging American primacy and pursuing strategic interests in the world's trouble spots. As competition accelerated, potential hegemonic powers have re-emerged on the international stage, benefiting from hyper-globalisation like the PRC. Consequently, Beijing's economic and military might have significantly grown (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 42; Xinbo 2018). Many analysts and strategic experts believe that the international system's structure is on the verge of fundamental transformations and that its inevitable fate will be multipolar (Brands & Gaddis 2021; Kupchan & Vinjamuri 2021; Walt 2021). Indeed, the international order has been marked by 'centred globalism' in which development was highly uneven, with a mainly Western core dominant. Alternatively, the emerging international order is a 'decentred globalism', in which the formation of modernity is no longer concentrated in a small group of states but is increasingly dispersed (Buzan & Lawson 2015, p. 274).

Mearsheimer (2019) presented an analytical paradigm of a new multipolar world. He argued that the emerging order is multipolar, not bipolar. This order is divided into two 'thick' bounded orders under the umbrella of a 'thin' international order, one led by the US, and another led by China. Although Russia is a Great Power, it is much weaker among its peers in the foreseeable future. Giving geographic proximity and historical patterns of enmity, Moscow will likely not align itself with the US or China and remain on the sidelines (Mearsheimer 2019, pp. 44-9). However, if the Kremlin chose to take one side against the other, it would be a disaster for the latter (Westad 2019, p. 95). For European major powers, they are likely to be part of the US-led bounded order, and to play an economic role in containing China. Waging economic and military competition among these two thick bounded orders will be the dominant feature; therefore, this will require enhanced cooperation between the members of each order. Nevertheless, the new 'thin' international order is likely to facilitate interstate cooperation in arms control, economic efficiency, and climate change (Mearsheimer 2019, pp. 44-9).

In the new multipolar world, the security competition of emerging orders will be significantly shaped by two key features. First, like the Cold War, military alliances will be crucial components of these two orders. Second, unlike the Cold War, there is significant economic intercourse between China

and the US and between China and US allies (Mearsheimer 2019, pp. 44-5). Besides, unlike the Soviets, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) orientation is nationalist, not internationalist; which means that achieving its security does not necessarily require the universalisation of its ideology. Another difference is that despite the US military[9] and economic superiority over China than it had with the Soviet Union, Beijing has the capacity to catch up far faster and more comprehensively than Moscow ever could (Westad 2019, p. 91). Thus, their competition is unlikely to significantly undermine their economic benefits if cooperation overcomes a security dilemma. However, despite this, China will dramatically seek to rewrite the rules for existing economic institutions and create new ones that reflect its growing power to gain more influence (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 46). Given that 'economic might is the foundation of military might' (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 46), Beijing has a strategic incentive to globally strengthen an influential economic power. Therefore, Washington will not stand idly by, rather it will wage a fierce economic competition with revisionist Beijing to perpetuate the status quo.

With the emergence of a multipolar world, and in the shadow of the security dilemma, the competing Great Powers will constantly seek to review and reshape their national strategies to suit their aspirations, dispel their fears, and preserve their gains. Moreover, as Westad (2019, p. 92) asserts, 'the more the US and China beat each other up, the more room for manoeuvre other powers will have,' ultimately, 'a world of regional hegemons'. Moreover, regional powers are likely to either hedge against or bandwagon with these Great Powers to better serve their national security interests.

4.3 Security Dilemma: Limited Cooperation

In an anarchic international order that lacks higher authority, fear prevails, and self-help is the means of survival. Uncertainty and fear of exploiting goodwill lead Great Powers into an economic, geopolitical, ideological, and military competition, which thus deepens the *security dilemma* (Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 29-36). In Herz's[10] (1950, p. 157) view, the Great Power rivalry is "an extreme manifestation of a dilemma with which human societies have had to grapple since the dawn of history". From a realist perspective, the crux of the security dilemma lies is that any specific measures taken by the state to increase its security often decreases the security enjoyed by other states. In other words, one state's desire to maximise its chances of survival will inevitably jeopardise the survival of other states (Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 29-36). Jervis (1978, p. 170) also

[9] Appendix F shows the military expenditures of the US and China.
[10] Herz was the first to address the security dilemma in his (1950) article 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma'

gave another definition of the security dilemma as the situation in which "one state's gain in security often inadvertently threatens others". Although actors may be linked by common goals, cooperation to achieve them is constrained by the problem of the security dilemma (Jervis 1978, p. 168). Like the realists, liberal internationalists believe in the anarchy of the international system, yet they are more optimistic. Commercial liberalism emphasises that economic interdependence would alleviate the security dilemma, thus paving the way for more cooperation among liberal and non-liberal societies (Doyle 1986, p. 1162). The possibility of war is more likely to lessen because interdependent states would rather trade than invade (Copeland 1996, p. 5).

Nonetheless, in World War I, commercial interdependence did not prevent Britain and Germany from fighting each other (Keohane 2002, p. 48). Indeed, it is difficult to sustain fruitful cooperation between states. Waltz (1979, p. 106) argues that the anarchic structure of international politics makes states worried about dividing potential gains that would benefit others rather than themselves. A state is also worried about becoming reliant on others as a result of cooperative endeavours and exchanges of goods and services. Great Powers live in a competitive world in which they see each other as potential enemies who seek to gain power at the expense of each other (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 51).

4.4 Formulating Grand Strategies

Every state on the planet aims to ensure its long-term security. Therefore, strategic security plans are formulated and formally expressed whether in a published document or by speeches of government leaders (DuMont 2019). The strategy of any state derives from the objectives pursued. The term *national interest* refers to the ultimate and final objectives that the state deems necessary to ensure its existence and prosperity and may create other national goals or objectives for the state that appear in accordance with the evolution of regional and international situations and circumstances surrounding it (Donald 2015, pp. 1-7). When developing a national security strategy, four areas are taken into account: 1) *Survival* interests are when the existence of the nation is in grave jeopardy; 2) *Vital* interests mean the nation's security and well-being will be subject to potential harm if the government does not take strong and decisive measures, i.e., while *Survival* interest 'deals with imminent danger of death', *Vital* interest 'is only potentially fatal' (Donald 2015, p. 15); 3) *Major* interests are those that, when threatened, could cause serious harm to the nation however do not mainly require force to protect; and 4) *Peripheral* interests are minor national interests that do not affect the nation as a whole if they are not achieved (Donald 2015, pp. 10-1).

4.4.1 The US security objectives: 'era of renewed Great Power competition'

> "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security" (Department of Defense 2018, p. 1).

The demise of the international alternative to liberal global governance paved the way for a 'war of values' (Duffield & Donini 2014, pp. 30,42). Since there were no potential rivals, a sole superpower has turned to "ignore realist dictates and act according to liberal principles" (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 25). The first signs of a fading post-Cold War era, marked by unipolarity, began in 2006-2008. Since that time, successive events on the international stage have demonstrated that the status quo is no longer appealing to China and Russia. For example, China's claims and militarisation in the South and East China Seas and Russia's annexation of Crimea were only the starting point for a renewed Great Power competition. Thus, this growing competition has been emphasised throughout US national and military strategies since 2015 (O'Rourke 2021, p. 21).

With the shift of the geopolitical focus towards the Asia region (see Figure 10), rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific has become a key driver to safeguarding America's global standing (Clinton 2011). Indirectly, this security objective has reflected the beginning of a shift in Washington's geostrategic priorities from the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the rise of China has brought back the politics of Great Power competition to the minds of US decisionmakers (NSS 2017). In an anarchic structure, it is impossible to have institutions or authorities that can create and enforce international law (Jervis 1978, p. 167). It was believed that international institutions could help to overcome the selfish behaviour of the state. However, it has become clear that economic interdependence has not encouraged mutual cooperation that would sustain states' prosperity (Walt 1998, p. 32). Contrary to what liberal thinkers believed, neither China's membership of the international institutions nor its involvement in the global economy have inhibited its aspirations (Mearsheimer 2018, pp. 192-8). Michael Pillsbury, a director for Chinese strategy at Hudson Institute, argued that "China has failed to meet nearly all of our rosy expectations" (Pillsbury 2015, p. 7). Based on these beliefs, US decision-makers turned to an advantageous balance-of-power policy with rivals to keep 'America first'. Remarkably, the US NSS (2017) placed more emphasis on economic health, Great Power competition, and advancement of the American influence than its predecessors. Trump's document criticised the strategies of his predecessors, which relied on promoting the liberal democratic order globally: "the US helped expand the liberal economic trading system to countries that did not share our values, in the hopes that these states would liberalise their economic and political practices and provide commensurate benefits to the US" (NSS 2017, p. 17).

In terms of America's global standing, three main challenges have been identified: (1) the revisionist powers of China and Russia; (2) the rogue states of Iran and North Korea; and (3) transnational threat organisations, such as jihadist terrorist groups (NSS 2017, p. 25).

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Figure 9: Map of Southeast Asia (Central Intelligence Agency n.d.-b)

Trump's strategy emphasised the danger of China's role in the Indo-Pacific region at all levels. On the geopolitical level, the danger of this competition is because it is based on the dichotomy of free and repressive world order visions. As for the economic and military levels, China resorts to a policy of economic enticement and intimidation; if required, it may resort to the military option to impose its political leadership. The NSS (2017) explicitly articulates Chinese aspirations of sovereignty over the region and clearly differentiates between US and PRC sovereignty approaches: "states throughout the region are calling for sustained US leadership in a collective response that upholds a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence" (NSS 2017, pp. 45-6). Consequently, Dong (2021) describes the US hedging strategy, Pivot to Asia, as a neo-containment (a new Cold

War strategy); whereas, he sees that the BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) ambitions of the PRC are components of China's hedging portfolio (Dong 2021, pp. 5-10).

James Jeffrey (2017), a former US ambassador to Turkey and Iraq, argued that this strategy has seemingly corrected some flaws and blind spots in recent US foreign policy. While it emphasised the China and from Russia's threat, the focus on global 'do-goodism' was de-emphasised, and the notion that the worldwide liberal values victory was inevitable but was ignored. (Jeffrey 2017). Nevertheless, Luis da Vinha (2018) argued that the 'America First' foreign policy, which mainly focused on nationalism and unilateralism, has failed to enhance America's ability to lead the liberal international order. He adds that this policy has created a state of anxiety and uncertainty among many of America's traditional allies, which has allowed China to 'fill the void' left by the decline of the US global leadership role and to extend its political and economic influence in Europe and Asia and the Middle East. Consequently, rather than promoting US global leadership, Trump's America First strategy has instead led to an 'America Alone' outcome that has isolated Washington and undermined its geopolitical influence (Vinha 2018, pp. 13,5,32).

4.4.1.1 Towards 'renewing America's advantages'

> "We must prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China….
> Competition with China is going to be stiff" (Biden 2021a).

While the Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG 2021) included a wide range of non-traditional threats, it focused remarkably on the distribution of power across the world. The (2021) argues that the US relationship with nations is built primally on promoting good governance and democratic universal values. This strategy views Russia and China as existential threats, as they have invested heavily in various means to check US strengths and prevent it from protecting its interests and those of its allies in the world. Notwithstanding, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on Beijing since many of the INSSG's clauses have identified China as the *main competitor* that poses a fundamental threat to 'a stable and open international system' (INSSG 2021, pp. 8-10).

Regarding Beijing's regional ambitions, Mearsheimer (2010, p. 390) argues that the historical record of the US shows that it does not tolerate peer competitors. To ensure that it remains the world's only regional hegemon, it will strive to contain and eventually weaken China and ensure that Asia is without a regional hegemon. This argument is literally consistent with Biden's, as INSSG stated that ensuring the US's national security requires it to "promote a favourable distribution of power to

deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the US and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions" (INSSG 2021, p. 9). Thus, unlike its predecessor, the INSSG (2021, pp. 9-10) emphasised confronting these challenges diplomatically through multilateral cooperation, partnership-building, burden-sharing, and full and effective re-engagement in international institutions. Hence, Washington is likely to mobilise the international community to reach a collective consensus that undermines China's ambitions. Consequently, according to the US strategy, the international community will have two critical choices: to either align themselves with good or with evil.

4.4.2 China security objectives

> "Hide our capacities and bide our time, but also get some things done" (Deng Xiaoping, quoted in (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 380).

The 1970s witnessed a remarkable turning point in the foreign affairs of the PRC, which transformed itself from being in diplomatic isolation to full integration within the international system. By the end of this decade, China abandoned its isolationist approach, taking advantage of the existing international system in order to achieve mutual benefits (Alterman 2017, p. 4). In 1971, the PRC was restored to its seat in the UN (UN General Assembly 1971). A dramatic opening up in Sino-American relations had ended decades of ideological enmity. In 1972, in the wake of Nixon's trip named "the week that changed the world", a new era of fruitful Sino-American relations began, which later enabled China to break its totalitarian isolation to join the world (Shambaugh 2020, pp. 11-3). For Washington, the Sino-American rapprochement was seen as a tactical aspect of the Cold War and a solid foundation for the development of the New World Order. According to Brown (2017, p. 82), 'China was strategically important in the Cold War, as a means of needling the Russians'.

As for China, however, agreement on a 'one-China' policy, which recognises Taiwan as a province of PRC rather than an independent state, was imperative for Sino-American relations to proceed forward. To consolidate this nascent friendship, the American side decided to allay Chinese concerns by emphasising that Taiwan is an integral part of China and that a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue is an internal Chinese affair (Kissinger 2011, pp. 243,71-72). Moreover, during the Deng Xiaoping era, economic development dominated China's relations with the world. Therefore, a great emphasis had been placed on deepening ties with the developed countries to attract technology, investment, aid, and expertise (Shambaugh 2020, pp. 11-3). With an emphasis on economic reforms, Beijing preferred neutrality and calm in addressing the uncertainty caused by the disintegration of

the Soviet Union and the fall of communist party-states in Eastern Europe (Shambaugh 2020, pp. 14-5).

China's approach in the 21st century has been centred around the 'Going Global' policy. Its official relations with most of the world's countries paved the way for its representatives to strengthen its footprint in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Its strategic objectives centred around securing raw materials and energy resources to meet its growing economic needs. During its 'Golden Decade' (1999-2009), China's relations with its neighbours and the international community of nations were characterised by cooperation and stability. However, China did not sustain this peaceful approach for long. In China's 'year of assertiveness' (2009-2010), Beijing unveiled a new assertive approach that left many countries in uncertainty about this trend (Shambaugh 2020, pp. 15-7). For example, China threatened the Philippines with diplomatic and economic retaliation over conflicting claims in the South China Sea (SCS). Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has shown increasing assertiveness and played a proactive role on the world stage. President Xi believes in the necessity of adopting 'striving for achievement' diplomacy instead of former leader Deng Xiaoping's 'passive diplomacy'. In other words, Beijing should believe in its capabilities, practise 'major-country diplomacy', and be proactive in taking the initiative (Shambaugh 2020, pp. 17-9). Thus, the rise of China is unlikely to be peaceful in the coming decades. As Buzan (2010, p. 21) argued, "the international order that China has committed itself to joining, and particularly the economic order, is in trouble, and cannot carry on as it has been".

It can be said that China is developing its role on the international stage in proportion to its relative gains by pursuing regional and international policies that serve its aspirations. In this way, the international community that adopted it when it was *weak* is worried that its rise will not be what it had been assumed. Arguably, China's growing economic and demographic weight has forced it to abandon its diplomatic isolation and work on legislation and initiatives that can sustain its growth. Hence, China's growing economic, diplomatic, and military weight is being directed toward revisionist geopolitical goals. Over the past 40 years, plans for reform and opening up to the global economy have contributed to China's transition from near-isolation into the world's largest commercial economy (Garnaut, Song & Fang 2018, pp. 1,5). This increasing economic growth has

given China considerable weight internationally[11]. Since the state's power lies in the strength of its economy, it is self-evident that China will seek to exploit its global position to advance its economic gains and extend its influence in many areas of international relations.

In recent years, China has begun to seek a systematic change in the structure of the global economy without engaging in a direct conflict with the US. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) encouraged Chinese policymakers to exert a worldwide global economic influence by adopting a set of new initiatives and instruments. There was a consensus among Beijing's political circles that China's international influence had failed to keep pace with its growing economic power (Mead 2014, pp. 69-72; Naughton 2020, pp. 114-5, 20). Thus, the foreign economic policy had to be restructured to consider the new reality.

4.4.2.1 A glimpse of China-led order

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Figure 10: Map of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2018, p. 11).

[11] A recent report by PricewaterhouseCoopers concluded that China will be the largest economy in the world by a significant margin in 2050. While China has outperformed the US as the world's largest economy in terms of PPP in 2014, the report predicts that China will outperform the US in terms of GDP at MERs before 2030 (see Appendix B).

In response to the GFC, China committed to restructuring the global economic system that will contribute to enhancing its economic growth. In 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the BRI (see Figure 10); a comprehensive and high-profile program to expand the reach and influence of China's global economy (Naughton 2020, pp. 120-7). It presented its development ambitions as an opportunity that the world should not miss (People's Republic of China 2019, p. 14). Beijing's White Paper on International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021) emphasises the BRI's role as a platform for China's global commercial activity. This document highlights that 'South-South' development cooperation is the focus of China's foreign policy (People's Republic of China 2021). Through this initiative, China seeks to achieve a set of goals, including the following:

- **Ensuring the stability of energy supplies:** The BRI project aims to develop several economic corridors, such as the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (PCEC). Hence, PCEC is expected to secure nearly 44% of China's energy needs from the Persian Gulf (Mobley 2019, p. 64).

- **Benefiting from the growth of world trade:** Global trade is expected to grow further during the coming years, driven by several factors, including the expected increase in the size of the middle class in many regions of the world, particularly, in the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and North Africa regions. Thus, China seeks to take advantage of this expected growth and demand for its products (Schortgen 2018, pp. 25-6).

- **Strengthening the global status of China's currency**: Beijing seeks to accelerate the internationalisation of the renminbi (RMB), which is the official monetary currency of the PRC, to make it the main currency of global trade (Schortgen 2018, pp. 26-7).

- **Made in China 2025 industrial policy (MIC25):** Through this ambitious plan, China seeks to implement its economic plan bearing the slogan 'Made in China 2025', which aims to transform China into an advanced economy of high value-added industries and a leading global technological superpower by 2049. This plan will likely undermine other leading economies of the world (Parepa 2020, p. 192; Wübbeke et al. 2016, pp. 5-8; Zenglein & Holzmann 2019, p. 8).

In the final analysis, the Chinese-led BRI plan may be a beneficial long-term strategic option for the countries involved due to its contribution to infrastructure development of the host countries and

benefits to their economies. However, this initiative is mainly driven by Beijing's economic and security interests. Consequently, all involved countries will be vulnerable over time to neo-colonialism, enabling China to position itself as a centre for trade and investment for nearly 136 countries across the Eurasian and African continents and as a security partner for some of these countries (Parepa 2020, p. 196). Furthermore, there are many geopolitical dimensions of the BRI, beginning with the expected repercussions for China's position as a major power in the world and its expected effects on the structure of the international order as a whole. Mearsheimer (2019, p. 47) argued, the BRI and AIIB initiatives not only boost Beijing's economic growth but ultimately aim to project its military and political power globally, which are likely to be a central part of the bounded order it leads. Hence, it aims to build a new globalisation centre in Beijing (Mayer 2018, pp. 4-5). China, therefore, aims to challenge the US-established international order by establishing alternative economic institutions to those based on the Bretton Woods system of international monetary management. Thus, in the Middle Eastern countries, China is likely to use its economic partnerships to arrange a Middle Eastern order conducive to its aspirations.

In an explicit counter to the BRI, the US has devoted its efforts to undermining China's ambitions by urging the international community of nations to reject involvement in the BRI. Recently, the G7 leaders have adopted the democracies-led 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) initiative, "a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership", aimed at supporting low- and middle-income countries in building better infrastructure (The White House 2021a). Likewise, in September, the European Commission (EU) announced its new global communication strategy, 'Global Gateway', which promises to offer a credible alternative to the BRI based on promoting values, transparency, and good governance. The Global Gateway mainly focuses on strengthening global supply chains and developing new investment projects on green and digital technologies (European Commission 2021). Moreover, at the recent 'Summit for Democracy', more than 100 democracies gathered[12] , including Iraq and Israel from the Middle East, to re-emphasise democracy and denounce autocracy. In this summit, President Biden (2021b) unveiled the 'Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal' to promote democratic resilience and human rights globally through diplomacy. Hence, in the Middle East as in other parts of the world, it can be foreseen that an assertive diplomacy movement by the US and other democracies will be increasingly exerted to encourage countries to reduce or eliminate their reliance on China's BRI investment and respect liberal ideals.

[12] See participants list (Department of State 2021)

5. SINO-AMERICAN SECURITY OBJECTIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

5.1 The US Security Objectives

"America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests."[13]

As a bastion of the international economic and security system since the post-Cold War, the US has sought to promote a rules-based order in which all nations could compete to enhance stability and predictability. In the Middle East, US policy toward the region since the post-World War II period has been based on three main pillars. According to Hudson (1996), the policy aims to guarantee a safe and cheap crude oil supply to Western economies, ensure Israel's security, and promote anti-communism (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 198; Hudson 1996, pp. 329-36). However, over time, some aspects of this old triad have lost their lustre. For example, due to the phenomenon of the US shale oil boom, the emphasis on crude oil supplies from the Middle East has waned (Lons et al. 2019, p. 26).

By 2020, America had become the largest oil-producing country in the world, with a production rate of more than 19 million barrels per day (b/d), with exports of more than 8 million (b/d) (Energy Information Administration 2021b). Since 2010, its crude oil imports from the Persian Gulf and OPEC have declined from nearly 48% of its total imports to 14% (see Figure 12). However, all US national security strategies since 1991 have emphasised unwavering commitment to Israel's security (INSSG 2021, p. 11; NSS 1991, p. 9; 2006, p. 38; 2015, p. 26; 2017, p. 48). As argued by Mearsheimer and Walt (2007, p. 48), since the establishment of the Israel state in 1948, many of America's Middle Eastern policies have centred around its commitment to the security of the Jewish state.

[13] Henry Kissinger, quoted in (Schweller 2018, p. 141)

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Figure 11: US crude oil imports (2000-2020) (Energy Information Administration 2021c)

The US entered the Middle East "to reassure, warn intimidate, suppress, pacify, rescue, liberate, eliminate, transform, and overawe" (Bacevich 2016, p. 361). Until the early 2010s, the American will and capabilities were the decisive factor in deterring perceived foes and maintaining American primacy. This approach has been somewhat consistent with the status quo regional and global powers. Given a physical infrastructure of American militarism, neither regional nor global revisionist powers were willing to challenge this will. Furthermore, successive US presidential administrations have reflected the unparalleled ability to bear the financial, social, and political costs of maintaining American primacy when it comes to protecting their vital interests (Yom 2020, pp. 75-82).

Since 2011, however, the US unbridled will appears to be declining. This retrenchment has neither been driven by learning from past mistakes nor by exhausting material variables, but rather by purely geopolitical considerations. Conflict with adversaries in the Middle East no longer poses a vital threat to American social life, economic influence, and political institutions. Given its distinctive geography, neither a nuclear-armed Iran nor radical Islamic terrorism have the ability to overcome the barrier of distance and disrupt the prosperity and security of the American homeland. The reality

is that these threats are more territorialised (Yom 2020, pp. 75-82). Consequently, "the US is gradually removing itself from the Middle East landscape due to lack of will rather than material capacity" (Yom 2020, p. 76). As credible threats to its prosperity and security fade, the US will continue to avoid major conflicts and interventionist activities, which would give global powers room for geopolitical breathing. This reduction in commitment does not equate to abandonment (Yom 2020, p. 82). Rather, Washington will adopt offshore balancing strategies, meaning greater reliance upon regional allies. Therefore, American interventionism will be limited unless there is a major and violent attack on American interests, or a need to prevent a major collapse or re-conjugation of regional order (Yom 2020, pp. 75-82).

Accordingly, the Biden administration has begun to reconsider its foreign policy towards the Middle East region by adopting a different approach from its predecessors. The new policy is aimed at promoting American interests through restoring diplomacy as a practical approach to confronting and absorbing the accelerating developments in the region while moving away from engaging in forever wars. Washington's concerns are therefore centred primarily around ensuring Israel's security and its integration with its neighbours, addressing humanitarian issues, countering the influence of rival Great Powers (China and Russia), disrupting terrorist networks, deterring Iranian aggression, and enforcing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which will serve to maintain security and stability in the region (INSSG 2021, pp. 11,3-5).

In a recent speech to the Middle East Institute, Marine Corps Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie spoke about the perceptions of declining US commitment and emphasised the region's strategic importance. He highlighted China's threat to US power and hegemony by its use of the BRI in leveraging of financial infrastructure needs of Middle Eastern countries, , which will enable China to capture or strengthen footholds in the region (Garamone 2021). As noted from Biden's Middle Eastern offshore balancing approach, the presence of hard power in an area of exclusive American dominance is likely to diminish, whereas diplomacy power is likely to become dominant. In this regard, Benaim and Sullivan (2020) argues that the traditional US hard power strategy of onshore balancing in the Middle East has not been successful. Therefore, they propose a less ambitious and yet more ambitious strategy simultaneously: less ambitious in terms of military goals and reshaping states from within, and more ambitious in employing American influence and 'aggressive diplomacy' to achieve more sustainable outcomes. Given the circumstances, politics and power relationships in the region are being influenced by a trend that began during the Obama era and has been adopted under the Biden administration. Even if the US diplomatic weight remains influential,

it will certainly not as effective as the previous military one. As American engagement decreases in the Middle East, regional powers, as well as external powers, will endeavour to fill this power vacuum, either by increasing their self-reliance or forming new and complex geostrategic alliances (Cook 2021a, pp. 1-2).

Considering these multiple political and strategic factors emerging in the Middle East region, it can be anticipated that US policymakers will seek to create a new favourable regional balance of power to replace the old one that folded over the invasion of Iraq. The new balance of power that the Obama administration sought to establish neither necessarily meant ending the relationship with Saudi Arabia nor ushering in a coldness of diplomacy with Israel and Turkey, but rather maintaining a close relationship with all parties that would thus enable Washington to balance one against another. Since the unveiling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (2015), the American openness to Iran has been aimed at consolidating the equilibrium equation that Washington has long relied on to prevent any state from gaining absolute regional hegemony over the region's affairs. In the event of a failure to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, imbalances in the polarity of the Middle East would follow, which would then push Israel, America's closest ally, and Washington's partners in the GCC, to ignite an arms race. Moreover, the region would not look much different if there is an Iranian-American consensus on nuclear armament. Indeed, an American regional policy that would absolutely support one regional power over others is not feasible because the superiority of any regional power over its competitors would make the offshore balance ineffective, which then could drag America back to onshore balancing. In other words, the more equal the regional powers are in terms of their material capabilities, the more chance there will be that they balance each other, and the less chance of imbalances in the regional status quo. However, if Iran acquires a deterrent nuclear weapon, or if China's Middle East strategy is being securitised, it is likely that Washington will be forced to raise the priority of its role and heightened intervention in the region.

5.2 The China Security Objectives: Pivots to the Middle East

The main objectives of China's strategy in the Middle East are multiple, manifold, and interrelated. Since the 1990s, China's interest in and economic reliance on the Middle East has skyrocketed (Scobell & Nader 2016, p. 4), which by the 2010s had culminated in Beijing realising the true geostrategic importance of the Middle East to China and the rest of the world (Scobell 2017, p. 9). From Beijing's perspective, the Middle East has become a vital source of energy resources, a promising market for trade and infrastructure investment, and a source of endless demand for

military arms sales (Salman, Pieper & Geeraerts 2015, p. 9). In addition, the Middle East has become China's pivot point for the BRI due to its unique geographical position at the juncture of Asia, Europe, and African continents and intersection with the Silk Road Economic Belt (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). In the Arab Policy Paper of 2016, Beijing's strategic approach emphasises pursuing common development, mutual benefit and maintaining a higher level of 'win-win cooperation' with Middle Eastern states (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). At the same time, the energy security strategy emphasises the preservation and sustainability of energy sources (People's Republic of China 2020, p. 5).

China's rapid economic development, fuelled by the country's thirst for energy resources, was the forerunner to Beijing's engagement into the Middle East (Cook 2021a, p. 11). In 2019, China's imports of crude oil from the Middle East grew by about 44% (see Figure 12). It is not just energy that drives Beijing's engagement into the area; trade and infrastructure investment have also grown at an accelerating pace. By 2019, China had surpassed the US to become the largest trading partner of most Middle Eastern countries (see Table 3). Moreover, Chinese business investments and contracts have expanded throughout the region. As for China's two giant global initiatives, the BRI and the AIIB[14], most Middle East regional countries have been drawn into joining these schemes since 2015, though there are differing levels of participation.

Figure has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.

Figure 12: China's crude oil imports by source in 2019 (Energy Information Administration 2020, p. 6)

[14] See the attached tables in Appendix C

Table 3: Volume of Chinese imports and exports in comparison to volume of US imports and exports from selected Middle Eastern countries in 2019. (USD billion)

Country	Chinese imports	US imports	Chinese exports	US exports
Egypt	0.99	3.2	12.2	5.5
Iran	13.4	---	9.6	---
Israel	5.1	19.5	9.5	14.4
Iraq	23.8	---	9.5	---
Jordan	0.43	2.2	3.7	1.5
Kuwait	13.4	1.4	38.6	3.2
Oman	19.4	1.3	3	2.5
Qatar	8.7	1.7	2.4	6.5
Saudi Arabia	54.2	14.9	23.9	23.9
Turkey	3.5	12.6	17.32	14.2
UAE	15	4.3	33.4	20.0

Source: (ChinaMed Data 2021; US Trade Representative 2021)

5.2.1 China's partnership diplomacy

Although China's relationships in the Middle East initially centred around the economic hub, Beijing has found regional geopolitical developments as an opportunity to deepen its involvement and exercise power further. Since 2014, the establishment of collaborative partnerships based on comprehensive and strategic cooperation between China and the region's states has ushered in a new stage of development and broad qualitative progress. Moreover, during the 2014 China-Arab Cooperation Forum, a 1 + 2 + 3 cooperation framework was proposed by President Xi Jinping, which placed energy security as the 'core', and regarded infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as 'two wings' while nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy fields are considered as the three 'breakthroughs' (Shaoshi 2020, p. 379). The geostrategic importance of the region is due to it being the gateway for China to Europe and Africa. By looking at China's comprehensive strategic partnerships[15], it becomes apparent that Beijing's Middle Eastern partnerships have focused mainly on oil-producing countries and those adjacent to the canals and straits (e.g., Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt). Ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and the Suez Canal is a guarantee that trade through these areas will flow smoothly. In Egypt, for example, China has invested tens of billions in the Suez region (Cook 2021a, pp. 10-4). In contrast to the Western approach, China bases its strategies on a state-centric approach. As Cook (2021a, p. 13) described it:

[15] See the attached tables in Appendix D

> "The fact that China comes to the Middle East with no commitment to the types of regimes it partners with or the quality of political and economic institutions within them is precisely what makes it so attractive to leaders across the region."

Middle Eastern countries have welcomed China's investments and linked them to their existential strategies. In Israel, despite US concerns, the state-owned Shanghai International Port Group in China was allowed to invest and operate the Haifa Port for 25 years. Moreover, Chinese companies are also working on building and operating a private terminal in Ashdod and a light rail in Tel Aviv. According to Dan Catarivas, Israel's director-general of Foreign Trade and International Relations, "Israel is a small country that is very dependent on trade. The US is its most important ally but it also needs to look out for its own interests" (Ben-David 2021). Moreover, Yossi Cohen, the outgoing head of Israel's foreign intelligence agency, said that "China is not opposed to us and is not our enemy" (Kerstein 2021).

In Iran, under a sweeping economic and security agreement, China committed to invest $400 billion in Iran over the next 25 years in exchange for a steady supply of oil (Fassihi & Myers 2021). In the GCC countries, many have linked their reform and growth ambitions to the BRI. Saudi Arabia, for example, has incorporated the BRI into its ambitious National Transformation Program - Vision 2030 initiative , stating that the BRI is "one of the main pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030 which would seek to make China among the Kingdom's biggest economic partners" (Fulton 2017). Since 2016, three agreements worth $163 billion have been signed with China to invest in energy, infrastructure, and telecommunications (Blanchard 2017; Gao 2017; Reuters 2019). In addition, Saudi Arabia welcomed Huawei's investment in 5G networks and hosted its largest flagship store outside China which is situated in the capital city of Riyadh (Reuters 2021; Sacks 2021). Saudi Arabia also entrusted the telecommunications infrastructure of NEOM, a futuristic mega-city being built on the Red Sea in northwest Saudi Arabia, to Huawei (Huawei 2020).

The same trend has been followed by other GCC countries. Kuwaiti officials, for example, stated that the BRI partnership with China aids Kuwait in achieving its 2035 Vision for Development (Fulton 2017). In the UAE and Qatar, the presence of Chinese banks has been exploited to facilitate trading in the Chinese RMB by negotiating currency swap agreements (Fulton 2020, p. 375). More importantly, China has covertly militarised the UAE's Khalifa Port, which is operated by China's giant COSCO shipping conglomerate in accordance with the BRI's bilateral partnerships (Lubold

& Strobel 2021). Thus, these examples demonstrate that China has been able to penetrate the economies of the region despite its complex domestic and regional dynamics, which have often been difficult for other outside powers to reconcile.

5.2.2 Filling a power vacuum

China is well aware that the Middle East has for decades been among the most important key areas of conflict and rivalry between Great Powers. Historically, the region has been an arena of rivalry amongst the British, French, and Ottoman empires and, during the Cold War, the US-Soviet Union contest for global domination. As Scobell (2017, p. 12) put it, "for a country that considers itself a Great Power, being seen as a major player in the Middle East is important. Hence China desires to raise its profile in the region". To that end, China's Westphalian approach was a sword and spear with which it penetrated the region. In its policies and rhetoric, China has consistently refused to interfere in the Middle Eastern states' internal affairs. In its approach to the region, Beijing emphasises the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and respect for state sovereignty. In his recent visit to the Middle East, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, emphasised that China has been and will be a reliable supporter and partner of developing countries because it belongs to the same Global South background sharing socio-economic and political foundations. In an implicit signal to the United States, Wang urged the region's states to stand up to external interventions and explore their development paths independently (Papa 2021).

However, from the perspective of authoritarian and undemocratic regional regimes, regardless of Chinese rhetoric, the complete alignment of ideological and political interests with Great Powers is not as important as having precautionary options in which to manoeuvre. Perhaps the Arab Gulf states believe that turning away from their long-term security partner is not easy, even if they feel they must. This reluctance could be because Washington has been their unbreakable security shield against their historical adversary, Iran. However, Washington's recent aggressive diplomacy has sounded alarm bells for many of these countries. For example, in the wake of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Biden asserted that he will make the Saudis 'pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are' (Sanger 2021). Hence, the Saudi human rights record, which is of no concern to China or Russia, often undermines US-GCC relations. Moreover, the debt trap label with which the Chinese initiative is often criticised is not a concern for relatively rich countries like those of the GCC. Rather, all they care about is attracting infrastructure investments to help them get out of the *oil trap*, since dependency on oil revenue will eventually prove fatal for the economies of states that

are unable to diversify their economic structures. The Western alternatives to the BRI, arguably, will not be willing to build bridges and localise technology in the targeted countries. Nor is the US able to ignore its democratic values when it comes to the human rights record of some countries of the Middle East. Therefore, Beijing has taken advantage of growing regional apprehension and uncertainty about relationships with the US to present itself as a credible option.

Over the past three decades, China has been able to sustain its security objectives with minimal effort; however, this will not be the case in the coming years. China has not yet been involved and does not prefer to engage in the region's thorny and complex security issues. For decades, the US security role in the region has paved the way for China to extend its influence in the Middle East economically. As an illustration, among the US Fifth Fleet's tasks in Bahrain is the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz security, through which nearly a third of the world's imports of crude oil pass, countering piracy and securing the vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Combined Maritime Forces n.d.). More importantly, until 2010, the US role had played a decisive part in maintaining the balance of power in the region. However, the US disengagement with regional affairs, which has been predicted since 2010 and confirmed in early 2021 by President Biden's administration, is very likely to change the security equation in the Middle East, leaving a gap in their absence. Therefore, it is likely that China will engage in security-related issues to sustain and protect its growing economic interests. Nevertheless, neither Beijing, with its regional hedging strategy, nor even the heir to the Soviet Union, can be reliably predicted to fill the US security vacuum in the GCC.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE SINO-AMERICAN RIVALRY ON PERSIAN GULF SECURITY

6.1 Overview

Contemporary shifts in the global balance of power have led to dramatic alterations in accounts, attitudes, and policies of the Gulf security subcomplex. Since decolonisation, the US has sought to fill the power vacuum, not only for political and ideological motives, but also for moral and economic motives. Meanwhile, Washington's foreign policies had been characterised by a more pragmatic approach. For example, to contain the communist camp, it neutralised underdeveloped China. During that time, the US was joined by countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, who preferred to be part of the strong US-led anti-communism coalition for a purely defensive reason: "maintaining independence in the face of a potential threat" (Walt 1985, pp. 6-8). With the decline of communist influence and the consolidation of the foundations of Arab-Israeli peace, broader security motives (e.g., advancing the Israeli-Arab peace process, energy security, combating international terrorism and WMD) remained on Washington's agenda and the main driver of its involvement in the region's dynamics.

During this period, despite the differing American attitude towards the security-related concerns of its regional partners (e.g., the Palestinian-Israeli issue and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime), its Persian Gulf clients had to reconcile this reality with their interests, which centred around a number of existential realities: 1) the Soviet socialist thesis posed an existential threat to regional status quo regimes; 2) the US had long been a largest trading partner for most of the region regimes prior to achieving its own oil-independence; 3) the US was also the *main* and *reliable* security partner for most of the region's regimes. However, the waning influence of the Middle-East-based securities on US security and resource prosperity has reduced Washington's involvement in the region (Yom 2020). Consequently, Washington is no longer the region's first economic partner nor a reliable security partner after the events of the Arab Spring.

On the other hand, the first signs of the US's disengagement from the Middle East have been accompanied by indications that other global powers are eager to fill the widening American vacuum. Russia, regardless of its hidden agenda, has demonstrated the credibility of its security partnerships when it sided with the Assad authoritarian regime against the international community. In addition, Russia has second-tier weapons systems available for purchase, with supply not subject to any political considerations or moral preconditions. The most important new security player in the region is China. Beijing's desire to pivot towards the Middle East was not unilateral. Rather it

was the result of a mutual desire shared with all regional actors in the Middle East. Unlike the US, China has brought to the region a set of economic solutions that are seen regionally as existential opportunities to strengthen the economy and diversify sources of income[16].

Moreover, while Washington restricts arms sales and the localisation of its technology to maintain the balance of power in Israel's favour and for moral considerations, Beijing often does not mind. Historically, due to the US refusal to provide Saudi Arabia with advanced missiles during the Iran-Iraq war, Riyadh had to recognise the PRC's 'one-China' policy in 1991 in exchange for a CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles deal in 1988 (Wang 1993, pp. 70-2). More recently, after Washington vetoed its Gulf partners' requests to purchase its advanced drones, the Chinese alternatives were available in the UAE, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Remarkably, Beijing has agreed to build the region's first drone factory in Saudi Arabia (Turak 2019).

Arguably, the Middle East is no longer at the top of Washington's priorities, either because its security threats have become more territorialised, or US national security priorities lie elsewhere. Although these factors may be true, the dynamics of Chinese-American competition are likely to be multi-regional. In the past bipolar period, the Middle East was one of the arenas for Soviet-American rivalry where everyone sought formatting pragmatic regional alliances. The existential interests of regional actors were largely compatible with the chosen camp's agenda. At that time, sovereignty and anti-Zionism considerations had pushed Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq to the East, while considerations of economic and political securities pushed Turkey, the GCC states, and pre-Khomeini Iran to the West. In such circumstances, the American ally was usually victorious. However, in a contemporary multipolar world, the Middle East has become a destination for Chinese economic power rooted in the region's economies. Indeed, China's economic power has gained weight in most security strategies of Middle Eastern actors, regardless of their political and ideological orientations. Washington has hoped its policy of Pivot to Asia while maintaining its offshore sphere of influence in the Middle East without getting overly involved would serve its vital interests globally. However, its competition with China will not be limited to the Indo-Pacific region. Another key point is that, despite its oil-independence, Washington is continually vulnerable to global oil market shocks and Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) intransigence in lowering prices (Kaye 2021; Martin & Blas 2021). China is not immune to this dilemma of vulnerability to oil prices, which explains its cooperation with Biden's call for the use

[16] Chinese investments in the Middle East have been discussed in Section 5 (Sino-American Security Objectives in the Middle East).

of the Strategic Oil Reserves. Nevertheless, China is the only importer of Iranian oil at a fixed and cheap price (Ziabari 2021).

Moreover, although the success of the Iranian nuclear agreement is in the US and China's major interests, its failure necessitates that Washington reconsiders reducing its presence in the region (Kaye 2021). For China, the success of the agreement means regional stability, more Iranian investment opportunities, while its failure may not pose significant threats from a strategic partner. Indeed, China has softened its stance on Iran's nuclear enrichment rights after the US and UK decision to sell nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, which Beijing deems a proliferation risk. Therefore, to maintain the equilibrium equation, the Biden administration has turned to de-emphasise arms sales restrictions to its traditional partners (Kaye 2021).

In summary of these events, it has become clear that the US is no longer the main player in the Middle East and yet its absolute withdrawal would not serve its comprehensive strategy to compete with China. The countries of the region will face a dilemma of reconciliation between a long-term security partner and a promising economic partner. The American partnership, from the perspective of the regional partners, is a stabilising factor in the region given its regional military bases and that they share the same concerns about Iranian ambitions. In addition, the distinctiveness of American universities and the attractiveness of Western culture and advanced technology of Silicon Valley are among the *soft powers* that have had a significant impact on civil societies in the Middle East.

As for the Chinese partner, despite its regional ambiguity strategy, security and economic considerations have prompted the countries of the region to embrace its initiatives. It represents a security and economic lifeline for Tehran, which is economically isolated from the international community. It also represents hope for many of the region's economies that seek to diversify their economy and expand their sources of income. Therefore, countries in the region will seek through strategic hedging strategies to combine these vital interests. However, regional actors will come to the conclusion that combining the two opposites may, over time, pose an existential challenge. As the Sino-American security competition intensifies, which some believe could result in a 'hot war' (Mearsheimer 2021, p. 48), it will then become clear that the world is divided into two camps, one led by China and the other led by the US. Countries of the Middle East will be forced to choose one or the other.

6.2 Mapping the Gulf security subcomplex

Several variables, including the region's waning appeal to the US decision-makers and Chinese ambiguity, may have opened the way for countries in the region to seek a cooperative framework. These attempts resulted in several regional talks, such as the al-Ula Declaration (ending Qatar's boycott)[17], the Iranian-Saudi talks[18], the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership (among regional actors) (Government of Iraq 2021), and the Turkish-Arab Quartet talks[19]. Despite these ambitious attempts, regional actors may not be able to move forward on this path. Indeed, it is difficult to achieve a cooperative framework in an environment where the existential interests of the actors are at odds. There are ambitions to restore the glories of the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the dream of Pan-Islamism.

Moreover, in light of the prisoner's dilemma paradoxical scenario inherent in the region, "there is no solution that is in the best interests of all the participants" (Jervis 1978, p. 171). For instance, despite its reassurances, Tehran wants cooperation that does not affect its nuclear ambitions, ballistic arsenal, and regional expansions, which is thus inconsistent with the will of the Gulf states, Israel, and even Turkey. From a realistic perspective, it is highly unlikely that Iran will give up its power gains because of the lack of trust fear of being exploited (Jervis 1978, p. 172).

Another crucial point that might explain the regional actors' hidden objectives behind the follow-up to these talks is that each side wants to show its good intentions to the international community. For instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia are unlikely to agree on anything; however, Iran's objective in participating in talks lies in its aims to gain an easing of US sanctions by signalling to the White House that it has become a responsible stakeholder. By the same token, Saudi Arabia realises that it is difficult to defy the will of the Great Powers regarding the need for Tehran to return to the nuclear agreement. Therefore, to ease international pressures, Riyadh's talks with Tehran may have been in keeping with the international will and approved of by the US, while simultaneously disbelieving any serious intent by Iran to relinquish control of its nuclear enrichment program.

Looking at the regional balance of power, the regional powers - Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Iran - have the largest military expenditures, respectively[20]. Additionally, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have

[17] See the Al-Ula Declaration Statement (Gulf Cooperation Council 2021)
[18] See the timeline of the Iranian-Saudi talks (US Institute of Peace 2021)
[19] The Arab Quartet refers to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, see (Ataman 2021)
[20] See Appendix F

an economic advantage, being among the G-20, while Israel has a nuclear advantage and a well-established partnership with the US. In contrast, economically exhausted and socially fragmented Iran finds its vital advantage centred on sponsoring militias and possessing nuclear capacity. Another key point is that Turkey and Iran do not want Saudi Arabia to monopolise the leadership of the Islamic world, while the latter sees their increasing interference in the Arab world as an existential threat (Sipalan & Kalin 2019). Therefore, the MERSC is inherently immune against cooperation because the security dilemma has a strong footprint.

With Israel's nuclear deterrent advantage, all regional powers to a significant extent have comparable military capabilities. That is, no power possesses a deterrent weapon that distinguishes it from the rest. Nevertheless, these states will not hesitate to acquire a weapon that would give them the advantage militarily if necessary and at any cost. Moreover, the security demands of the regional units are largely incompatible. Hence, in such an environment, "there is no way to get security without menacing others" (Jervis 1978, p. 211). For example, achieving complete security for Iran is an existential threat to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and to some extent, Turkey. Another example is that achieving comprehensive security for Riyadh or Jerusalem requires stripping Tehran of its survival capabilities. Therefore, cooperation on security among the states of the Middle East region may be an attractive and ambitious idea in theory, but it is difficult in practice to implement.

As previously emphasised, although Great Power competition is largely concentrated in the Indo-Pacific region, the Middle East is likely to be a secondary tactical area for each of the global superpowers. In other words, they are likely to exploit regional dynamics for relative gains at the expense of the other. For example, the US is likely to resort to a carrot and stick policy to break up the Chinese-Middle Eastern rapprochement. Moreover, as the only hegemonic regional power in modern history, it will not allow any power to exercise absolute dominance over its region (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 141). Therefore, in the Middle East, it is more likely to resort to diplomatic blackmail strategies. As for China, it is likely to exploit the shortcomings of the US approach and the dire regional need for security and development to present itself as a reliable ally. Meanwhile, it is likely that the regional powers will *cautiously* seek to evaluate their partnerships with the Great Powers in order to serve their vital interests. Consequently, regional powers, especially those frustrated[21], will seek pragmatic hedging strategies through which they will strive to expand their security and economic partnerships to enhance the chances of survival. At the regional level,

[21] Referring to the GCC's regimes which have long considered the US the main security guarantor.

according to the balance of power theory (BoPT), alliance formation is the common way to respond to a threat. Accordingly, regional status quo powers will *balance* against the revisionist ones, while small and weak states are likely to *bandwagon* (Walt 1985, pp. 4, 18; 1987, pp. 17-49). Thus, Iran has emerged as a potential hegemonic power. It has dramatically entrenched its sphere of influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and even Palestine since the collapse of the de facto regional balance of power in the post-Saddam era. Therefore, other regional powers (e.g., Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia), despite the strong dynamics of the security dilemma, may find an urgent desire and a common survival objective to balance against Iranian expansionism. Accordingly, strategic survival options that regional powers and small and vulnerable states are likely to pursue in dealing with regional challenges and global pressures will be anticipated.

6.3 The Strategic Behaviour of the Regional Powers: Hedging and Forming Alliances

> "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."[22]

6.3.1 Irian (unlimited-aims revisionist state)

According to the Balance-of-Interest Theory (BoIT) (Schweller 1994), Iran can be seen as a revisionist state that is not satisfied with the status quo arrangements. Therefore, to pursue its expansionist tendencies, Tehran is willing to accept great risks because it has nothing to lose. According to (Schweller 1994, pp. 103-4) this kind of state is "uninhibited by the fear of loss, is free to pursue reckless expansion". For example, as a result of President Trump's maximum pressure policy, Iran provocatively shot down a US drone and targeted its military base in Iraq (Wallsh 2020). Thus, unlike the status quo states, Iran is a power-maximising state willing to put its survival on the line, not to maintain but to improve its standing in the regional order. Hence, those states are known as unlimited-aims revisionist states because there is nothing to discourage their expansionist ambitions (Schweller 1994, p. 93). Accordingly, these states constitute the fundamental existential threat to the status quo states.

The MERSC geopolitical developments have served Iranian vital interests to extend its sphere of influence. Despite its deteriorating economy, Iran has harnessed its military and militia capabilities to overturn the status quo and expand its ideology. Among its regional competitors, Iran has the

[22] Lord Palmerston, British Prime Minister (1855-1859), quoted in (Ratcliffe 2016)

second strongest military (Global Fire Power 2021) and has a militia presence in many regional capitals. Given the revisionist gene factor, Tehran has forged pragmatic partnerships with both China and Russia. Notwithstanding, it is important to emphasise the economic power factor in the power balance equation (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 143). Iran has the worst economic situation among its competitors[23] due to the international sanctions imposed on its economy. As a strengthening of military power requires a solid economic foundation[24], Iran has tried to bypass this dilemma. Therefore, in the 2015-JCPOA, Tehran's conceding of its nuclear capabilities as a result of international pressures can be justified as a temporary strategy aimed at mobilising the necessary resources to bolster its expansionist tendencies[25]. However, when JCPOA's terms were expanded during the Biden administration, Tehran's hesitation has shown its strong realistic grounds (Masterson 2021). After all, Sino-Iranian multi-trillion-dollars partnership (Fallahi 2021) may be a crucial variable for overcoming international sanctions and thus achieving economic security.

Regarding regional powers competition, it is unlikely that Iran will seek regional balancing alliances. Rather, it will try to dismantle any balancing alliance against it, taking advantage of its offensive capabilities and regional militias. Therefore, Tehran's foreign policy is likely to pursue two key strategies: divide-and-rule and blackmail. First and foremost, Iran realises that it has become a common existential threat to its rivals. From a realistic perspective, since Saudi Arabia is the economic power in the Gulf, while Israel is the US-backed nuclear power in the Levant, the alliance of this mixture will not be in its existential interest. Tehran will seek to exhaust Riyadh in its war with the Iranian-backed Yemeni Houthi militias, and keep its militias in the Levant on alert for Israel. Moreover, it will lead the Islamist anti-Zionist discourse if Saudi Arabia normalises its relations with Israel. As for the small and weak states, the blackmail strategy is enough to put them on the sidelines at least if they resist being bandwagoners. Notably, this strategy has been effective in the GCC countries. The small Gulf states do not want to be a second destination for Iranian missiles and drones. Therefore, this may have pragmatically pushed all the Gulf states, except for Saudi Arabia and its backyard Bahrain, to maintain a varying degree of diplomatic representation with Tehran.

[23] See Appendix E

[24] Freeing Tehran's economy from sanctions will make it a regional economic powerhouse for several reasons, including its vast hydrocarbon resources and vast workforce. Besides, these financial inflows will enable it to build a better military power.

[25] According to Mearsheimer (2001, p. 165), "conceding power to a dangerous adversary might make sense as a short-term strategy for buying time to mobilize the resources needed to contain the threat."

6.3.2 Turkey (limited-aims revisionist state)

Based on the BoIT (Schweller 1994), Turkey can be classified within the category of a revisionist power with limited objectives, since it is prepared to incur high costs to maintain its possessions, but much higher costs to expand its values. Turkish foreign policy reflects the reality of dissatisfaction with the status quo; however, this tendency is often constrained by concerns of losing relative gains. Therefore, Ankara often pursues its expansionist tendencies in an opportunistic manner that tends to avoid risks (Schweller 1994, pp. 100-3). Therefore, these countries are known as limited-aims revisionist states because their endangering relative gains temporarily restrain their expansionist tendencies (Schweller 1994, p. 93). Accordingly, such countries are likely to temporarily reconcile with the status quo states as an exceptional measure to pursue an emerging existential non-security threat.

Accordingly, far from its stated Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbors (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021), Turkey has tested an aggressive policy at the regional and global levels. Since the Arab Spring, the Recep Tayyip Erdogan's administration has adopted the political Islam represented by the Muslim Brotherhood movements to expand its sphere of influence in the Arab world. Nevertheless, its support of these movements, which failed in Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco (al-Habib 2021), gained nothing but more regional isolation. At the global level, Turkey's relations with the EU and the US have worsened due to its gas explorations near Cyprus, the threat to push migrants to Greece, and the purchase and development of the Russian S-400 air defence system. However, regional geopolitical shifts and as well as its domestic challenges have led to marked changes in Turkey's regional foreign policy. Moreover, after the GCC rapprochement, there have been continued Qatari-brokered Turkish attempts to re-resolve problems with the Arab Quartet (Ataman 2021). These attempts can be linked to Turkey's internal variables. There are ongoing disagreements between political parties over Justice and Development Party's (AKP) internal and foreign policy. The Turkish lira has lost nearly 75% of its value against the dollar, inflation is around 20%, and unemployment is at 14% (Cook 2021b). In addition, there will be a presidential election in 2023. Therefore, it can be expected that Turkey may resort to a policy of zero problems with the Gulf states to reduce its isolation, at least in its Sunni environment.

Accordingly, despite the crisis in Saudi-Turkish relations (Harvey & Hacaoglu 2018), it is premature to expect any Saudi-Turkish rapprochement unless there are common existential security objectives that overcome disputed matters and pave the way for the formation of a pragmatic alliance. As for

the Iranian nuclear file, although Ankara rarely expresses its fears publicly, the pressures of geographical proximity and the clash of interests in several countries, such as Syria and Azerbaijan, are enough to anticipate a strong presence of the security dilemma. Therefore, it can be said that if Iran abandons its nuclear program, this will open more economic opportunities to Ankara and exacerbate the security dilemma for Riyadh and Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the openness to broader economic relations with Tehran, while the geopolitical contradictions remain in the regional agenda of the two parties, maybe a decisive factor in turning the balance of power in the region in favour of Iran. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it is likely that Turkey will seek in the first place to balance against Iran by joining anti-Iranian arrangements as a means of containment, and then rushing to acquire a nuclear weapon as a means of deterrence. In short, it can be concluded that Turkey is no longer an isolator, as the RSCT has argued (Buzan & Wæver 2003, p. 394), but rather a major player in the MERSC. Despite its regional revisionist tendencies, Ankara has not gambled with all its political cards, but rather kept a point of recovery through which relations with the status quo countries could be restored. Thus, regional powers, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, may eventually prefer to draw Turkey into their ranks. Regardless of its urgent problems, Turkey has the strongest army in the Middle East and the third most powerful military power in NATO. It also has the largest economy and advanced military industry in the region (Global Fire Power 2021).

6.3.3 Israel (status quo state)

Israel is satisfied with the US-backed regional status quo order, as it has been one of the main beneficiaries of its arrangements and therefore has an existential interest in maintaining it. Thus, it tends to incur high costs of deterring regional revisionist states for self-preservation and to maintain its relative gains in the existing order (Schweller 1994, pp. 100-1). Among its competitors, Israel has a leverage advantage due to its nuclear capabilities and its deep-rooted security partnership with the US. Internally, its vital national interest lies in keeping Israel safe from armed Palestinian factions and regional interference. Regionally, preventing any regional powers from gaining a nuclear or ballistic advantage is critical, which, if Israel fails to do so, the region will plunge into an arms race that could dramatically upset the balance-of-power and jeopardise its current military advantage over its neighbours (Ahren 2020). Moreover, it has an unbridled desire to end its regional isolation, which was partially achieved through the so-called 'Abraham Accords Declaration.' [26] Therefore, Israel's priority adversary is Iran because it seeks to destabilise Israel's security at home

[26] It is a normalisation agreement that aims to establish economic and diplomatic relations between Israel and the signatory countries, such as the UAE and Bahrain. See official agreements (Department of State 2020)

by supporting Hamas, and has terrorist militias close to Israel borders, such as Hezbollah. In addition, Tehran has an advanced nuclear program, which prompted Israel to allocate $1.5 billion for a possible strike on Iran's uranium enrichment facilities (Times of Israel 2021). Eliminating the Iranian threat, despite any diplomatic confrontation with the US, would still be preferable to living with a nuclear-armed Iran on its doorstep (Lis & Kubovich 2021). Despite Washington's assurances to Jerusalem that Iran would not have a nuclear weapon and that it would consider other options if the JCPOA was not revived (the White House 2021b), these promises did not ease the anxiety of Israel, which is geographically adjacent to Iran.

Given these considerations of Iran's aggressive intentions, it is likely Israel would want to be part of any regional arrangements to balance Iranian threats and maintain the status quo. Moreover, neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey would be happy if Iran managed to obtain a nuclear bomb. Although Turki al-Faisal (2020) devoted his speech in the 16th IISS Manama dialogue to criticise Israel[27], the truth is that when more pragmatic interests intrude, "security considerations take precedence over ideological preference" (Walt 1985, p. 24). In summation, to avoid Iran's hegemony and curb its ambitions to gain nuclear weapons before they become a reality, Israel is likely to seek a regional balancing coalition against Tehran.

6.3.4 Saudi Arabia (status quo state)

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia is a regional status quo power that behaves like a defensive and security-maximiser power. Unlike revisionist powers, status quo one tends to underestimate its non-security expansion due to its high costs. Indeed, status quo states consider military options as a last resort, and thus they tend to preserve their national interests by soft power capabilities they have. Moreover, their foreign policy can be described as a reaction to the dubious moves of revisionist powers (Schweller 1994, pp. 104-6).

Saudi Arabia has enjoyed an important position in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and to some degree in the global economy. Its embrace of the two holiest sites in the Islamic world (Mecca and Medina), as well as its founding and leadership of the Muslim World League and the Islamic Development Bank[28], have strengthened its soft power in these two worlds. Globally, Riyadh is a member of the

[27] al-Faisal is a Saudi politician and diplomat who served as director of the Saudi Intelligence Agency (1979-2001) and as ambassador to the US and UK.
[28] For more information see (Islamic Development Bank n.d.; Muslim World League n.d.)

G-20, an influential member of OPEC, and the sixth-largest country in terms of military expenditures[29]. Taken together, these factors have been harnessed to maximise security, and bring stability to the US-backed existing order. However, there are existential challenges that may limit these advantages. There is an influence competition with Iran in the Arab and Islamic worlds and to a lesser extent with Turkey (Sipalan & Kalin 2019), while sharp fluctuations in oil revenues (an economic variable) is challenging, and uncertainty about the credibility of the American security partner is concerning.

Regionally, although regional powers pose a threat to each other, geographical proximity and historical enmity remain important in alignment considerations. For example, Saudi Arabia has failed to counter Iranian expansion in four Arab capitals. Hence, with the inability of Saudi Arabia to gain the support of a great or regional power to restrain Iran, balancing with status quo states against Iranian threat would be the best available option. Hence, Iran's offensive intentions outweigh considerations of the aggregate power of Turkey or Israel. Indeed, "intentions, not power, are the crucial" factor in alignment (Walt 1985, p. 13). Therefore, it is likely that the coming period will witness a pragmatic Saudi-Turkish rapprochement and a secret rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel for an obvious reason: its top priority adversary is Iran.

Given the economic and geopolitical changes, Riyadh has pursued a strategic hedging policy in the post-Arab Spring. Economically, Riyadh's oil revenues, which constitute the largest share of its GDP, have contributed to advancing development in various sectors (General Authority for Statistics 2021). However, as oil price fluctuations accelerate (Energy Information Administration 2021a), which is likely to increase its pace in the foreseeable future due to climate issues, diversification of income sources has become a survival interest. Therefore, Saudi Arabia recently launched its grand post-oil-era initiative, Vision 2030, which aims, in theory, to create a sustainable economy (Government of Saudi Arabia 2016, p. 13). In practice, however, such an ambition requires a stable regional environment and advantageous economic partnerships. Therefore, economic hedging with China has been among the priorities of Saudi policymakers. The Saudis see the relationship with China as a means of ensuring a permanent buyer for its oil, a potential investor in its Vision 2030 plan for a sustainable economy, an alternative arms supplier to their traditional sources in the US and EU, and a potential supplier of nuclear energy.

[29] See Appendix F

Moreover, involving the Russian factor in the hedging calculations is crucial to maximise security. Thus, since 2016, a pragmatic Saudi-Russian partnership has grown dramatically (Kremlin 2016). Riyadh and Moscow announced the OPEC+ treaty (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries 2016) and recently signed an agreement aimed at developing joint military cooperation with China (bin-Salman 2021). Hence, it can be argued that this rapprochement with China has been in Riyadh's vital interests in attempting to fend off US assertive policies, ensuring favourable oil prices, having a potential security partner, and trying to attract or at least neutralise the Russian actor in regional issues. In short, it can be said that Saudi Arabia's extraordinary response to declining economic sustainability from oil and growing military concerns has seen them turn to Washington's main competitors, which was a critical factor in securing other military and non-military guarantees. However, sustaining this strategic hedging approach while avoiding American reaction will present diplomatic problems that Riyadh hopes to overcome peacefully.

Despite these political and economic manoeuvrings by Saudi Arabia, the long-term strategic security partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia will remain strong, due primarily to the common interests of the two nations in the Middle East. Historically, their mutual objectives regarding anti-communism and global energy security have kept them together for half a century (Alterman 2021). Remarkably, it was the 9/11 attacks that shook that understanding and the Arab Spring that made it worse. Under mutual uncertainty, the weight of their partnership has arguably not been diminished, but rather tamed to better aid Washington in pursuing its strategic regional security objectives. Accordingly, the US will be seeking Saudi Arabia's cooperation in achieving its priorities in the region: 1) relieving Iran's stubbornness and encouraging it to the nuclear agreement, 2) pushing Saudi Arabia to normalise with Israel,[30] and 3) pushing Saudi Arabia to respect human rights. An indication of the strength of the relationship is that, after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Washington did not impose severe sanctions, but rather restricted arms sales that were subsequently lifted[31]. In short, although human rights concerns are likely to predominate in future relations, the foundations of the Saudi-American partnership will remain solid despite any superficial cracks.

[30] It is important to note how the UAE's normalisation with Israel contributed to the atonement of its sins in Yemen and the acquisition of the advanced American F-35 fighters (Mehta 2021).

[31] By a vote of 67 to 30, the Senate supported the Biden administration's decision to sell Saudi Arabia $650 million in weapons (Desiderio, 2021). Besides, restrictions on the supply of the US's advanced THAAD system to Saudi Arabia have been lifted as an alternative to the Russian S-400 system (Helou 2021).

In Saudi-led GCC states, the Israeli threat has been de-securitised in exchange for a growing securitisation of the Iranian threat. A recent study has shown that there is a new cultural discourse emanating from the Arab Gulf states social media (Twitter) that supports further normalisation (Hitman & Zwilling 2021, pp. 20-2). Moreover, when Jake Sullivan, the US national security adviser, raised normalising relations with Israel, Saudi officials did not reject the notion (Williams 2021). Moreover, Bahrain's normalisation with Israel may have been a reflection of a cautious Saudi blessing [32]. Nevertheless, there are still concerns that any Saudi-Israeli normalisation may be exploited by regional securities actors, whether states or non-states, to mobilise the Islamic Street against Saudi Arabia. For the foreseeable future, as the US security footprint recedes, Riyadh and Jerusalem may eventually find themselves confronted with an urgent necessity: a pragmatic security alliance to maintain a regional order favourable to their vital interests.

6.3.5 Small and vulnerable states (sidelines states)

According to the BoIT, small and vulnerable states can be defined as those that do not have significant defensive or offensive capabilities that would enable them to maximise security[33]. Moreover, these states might suffer from weak state-society relations for several reasons: the illegitimacy of political elites and national institutions (e.g., Yemen and Syria); conflicts between local ethnic, religious, and political groups (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen); and the failure of multiculturalism (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon) (Schweller 1994, pp. 102-3). Therefore, these countries, have often been subject to regional and global penetrations. As Schweller (1994, p. 101) put it, "in a world of predators and prey, these states are prey." Moreover, in the Gulf subcomplex, one finds that the small Gulf states (i.e., Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman) do not have enough material power to defend their interests. As for Iraq, the cohesion between the state and society does not exist. In short, these countries are more likely to adopt a hedging strategy to achieve as much independence as possible, or at least pursue a bandwagoning strategy to align and appease the source of threats (Walt 1985, p. 6).

[32] Remarkably, there are signs of normalisation to be expected, as Saudi Arabia hosted, for the first time, a Jewish rabbi in early November 2021, see (Kalin & Jones 2021)

[33] All countries of the Levant and Gulf Subcomplexes possess relatively few defensive capabilities compared to Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

7. CONCLUSION

This section will conclude the study by summarising the key research findings related to the research aims and questions. It will also shed light on the contribution of the study. After that, it will review the study's limitations and propose opportunities for future research. The study aimed to explore the historical developments of MERSC to investigate the crucial regional patterns of security rivalry among regional actors on the one hand, and the changing interests that drive great powers to engage or disengage with the regional security dynamic. Accordingly, the study found that the Middle East has been, is still, and will continue to be a theatre of intense competition between regional powers. Since decolonisation, the MERSC security competition patterns have become more interconnected and regionalised, yet they had been aligned with, and reinforced by, contexts of Great Power competition. During this period, the regional powers in the Levant's security subcomplex had been the main formers of the region's conflicts and the polarisers of the outside helpers, whether from the Gulf subcomplex powers or global Great Powers. In the post-Cold War era, there have been two major shifts in the arrangements of the MERSC. First, the Levant's subcomplex has become the second core of the MERSC since Egypt's retreat from the geopolitical scene in the wake of the peace agreements with Israel, leading to further de-regionalisation of the Israeli-Palestinian issue thereafter. Second, since the 1980s, the Gulf subcomplex (Iranian-Saudi subcomplex) has become the dominant core of the MERSC, as this trend became crystallised after Iraq exited the balance of power equation in 2003. Meanwhile, Washington played a crucial role in military-political security issues to maintain a regional order favourable to its vital interests (i.e., energy security, Israel's security, preventing terrorism). Therefore, Washington had preferred to support its GCC clients, thus prompting Iran to intensify maximise its power while the Arab-Gulf states were immersed in their honeymoon.

However, in spite of its long history of penetrations, the Middle East order has recently seen a dramatic shift in the nature and substance of the global powers' engagement. Since the Arab Spring period, the US approach to the region has shifted from a strong-military presence to a non-interventionist approach because the region no longer poses any existential threats to its prosperity and security at home. Consequently, the political and military vacuum that followed the US disengagement from the region has contributed to accelerating patterns of regional competition among expansionist and status quo powers. Indeed, Iran has strengthened its influence in four Arab

capitals, the Turkish-Qatari coalition rode the wave of political Islam to reap the spoils, and the Saudi-led Arab Quartet launched counter-revolutions in many Arab Spring countries to restore the status quo. Meanwhile, China has adhered to strategic ambiguity regarding military-political issues, yet has been engaging in economic partnerships with most regional powers. It has become clear that the MERSC, while gaining partial independence in the wake of the Cold War, is now more independent to take over its military-political affairs than ever before.

While Moscow and Beijing are undoubtedly working to increase their influence in the political and economic spheres, it should not be forgotten that neither country has yet played a leading role in shaping the regional order. Russia does not have the financial leverage to replace the US, while China adheres to the principle of non-interference. Therefore, since neither country has the motive and can see any advantage in restoring the Middle East order, neither Great Power is unlikely to intervene beyond its capabilities and interests. However, with the return of geopolitics, there is no doubt that the US will maintain a tough stance against China. Nevertheless, given that Washington wants to lower the cost of intervention in the Middle East, it remains questionable to what extent it will be able to constrain Beijing's inherent ambitions in the region. While the carrot and stick policy was fruitful in security matters (e.g., the Saudi-Russian S-400), it may not be as productive in economic matters. As China's economic investment in the region grows, the White House may have to include economic alternatives in its offshore balancing strategies to be better able to dismantle its peer competitor's economic partnerships in the region.

With the US footprint declining, Gulf security has become a regional affair. This means that the security vacuum, which no other global power has the will or the capabilities to fill, has prompted the regional powers to deal with its repercussions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Since then, many regional alliances have been formed, such as the Iran-led Shiite camp, Saudi-led Arab Quartet, and Turkey-led Muslim Brotherhood camp. With the acceleration of geopolitical developments, new regional arrangements have been predicted based on the premise that the formation of pragmatic security alliances is the best way to respond to existential threats. Therefore, the regional powers' major and peripheral interests have been de-prioritised. Accordingly, the status quo powers (Saudi Arabia and Israel), as well as limited-aims revisionist power (Turkey) are the closest to security cooperation in the short- and medium-term. On the other hand, unlimited-aims revisionist power (Iran) will remain on the opposing side. Meanwhile, small, and vulnerable countries will try to avoid the absolute inclination to either side, whether by sitting on the sidelines or through policies of appeasement.

Though US policy has formed up around a de-emphasising of its security role in the Middle East, this perspective is likely to reverse according to economic developments in the region and the competitive relationship with China. The more China is linked to the region economically, the more America will take an interest in re-engaging in regional affairs to combat Beijing's influence there. Thus, the affairs of the security region have become more regionalised, and the regional actors, whether the status quo states or those revisionist states, have become obliged to undertake regional arrangements that would preserve their perceived existential interests. The US-China relationship will see their roles mainly adhere to an offshore balancing act as part for their long-term balance-of-power game. While Beijing will strengthen its strategic partnerships in the region to this end, Washington will re-emphasise its long-standing historical partnerships. Moreover, although Washington is no longer the key player, it will still dominate the Middle East order, at least in the short-term. To consolidate the US role in the long-term, especially in a multipolar international system, the US will need to apply greater emphasis on the economic aspects of its relations with Middle East states.

Thus, this study has contributed to the existing literature by showing how the security affairs of the MERSC have become more regionalised under current geo-political and economic conditions. The research also has elaborated how the Gulf subcomplex becomes the vital core of Middle Eastern security architecture because it includes two opposing powerful states, namely an unlimited-aims revisionist state (Iran), and a status quo state (Saudi Arabia). As for the Levant subcomplex, it has become a secondary core dominated by a status quo state (Israel) in the absence of a peer competitor. Finally, the study has demonstrated how Walt's balance-of-power and Schweller's balance-of-interest theories can be applied to regional powers response to the security vacuum and how Saudi Arabia is likely to pragmatically pursue security relationships with Israel to assist in containing its main adversary (Iran).

The study's findings must be seen in light of some limitations. First, while primary sources were available for the case of the US, there were either shortages or unreliability in primary sources for the Middle Eastern states and China. Second, the RSCT inter-regional level was not included in this study. Third, great emphasis has been placed on military-political and economic securities. For further studies, it is recommended that economic conditions be given greater consideration to help answer the question: What will be the exceptional measures of the post-oil Gulf states in dealing with the inevitable existential economic challenges?

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Appendix A: The US Four Grand Strategies

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Source: (Posen & Ross 1996, p. 6)

Appendix B: Projected GDP growth paths of China and the US

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Source: (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2017, p. 17)

Appendix C: Value of Chinese investments, BRI members and initial contributions to the authorised capital of the AIIB in the Middle East.

Chinese Investments & Contracts in the Middle East (2005 - 2021)

Country	Value	Country	Value
Turkey	$5.8B	***Kuwait***	$100M
Saudi Arabia	$7,23B	***Oman***	$650M
Iran	$4.72B	***Jordan***	$1.21B
UAE	$7.79B	***Iraq***	$1.8B
Israel	$10.03B	*Syria*	$12.8B
Egypt	$5.57B	*Yemen*	$3.76B
Qatar	$100M		

The Middle Eastern states of the BRI 2021

Country	Date Joined	Country	Date Joined
Turkey	2015	***Kuwait***	2018
Saudi Arabia	2018	***Oman***	2018
Iran	2018	***Jordan***	---
UAE	2018	***Iraq***	2015
Israel	---	*Syria & Palestine*	---
Egypt	2016	*Yemen & Lebanon*	2017
Qatar	2019		

The Middle East's Initial subscriptions to the authorised capital in the AIIB

Country	Number of Shares (USD million)	Country	Number of Shares (USD million)
Turkey	26,099	*Egypt*	6,505
Saudi Arabia	25,446	*Qatar*	6,044
Iran	15,808	*Kuwait*	5,360
UAE	11,857	*Oman*	2,592
Israel	7,499	*Jordan*	1,192
Total		**108,402**	

Data sources: (American Enterprise Institute 2021; Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 2021, pp. 29-31; Green BRI Center 2021)

Appendix D: China's Partnerships in the Middle East

The two most important partnerships in the hierarchy of Chinese partnerships.

Partnership	Priorities
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Cooperation and development in regional and international issues are fully pursued.
Strategic Partnership	Coordination of regional and international affairs more closely, including military affairs.

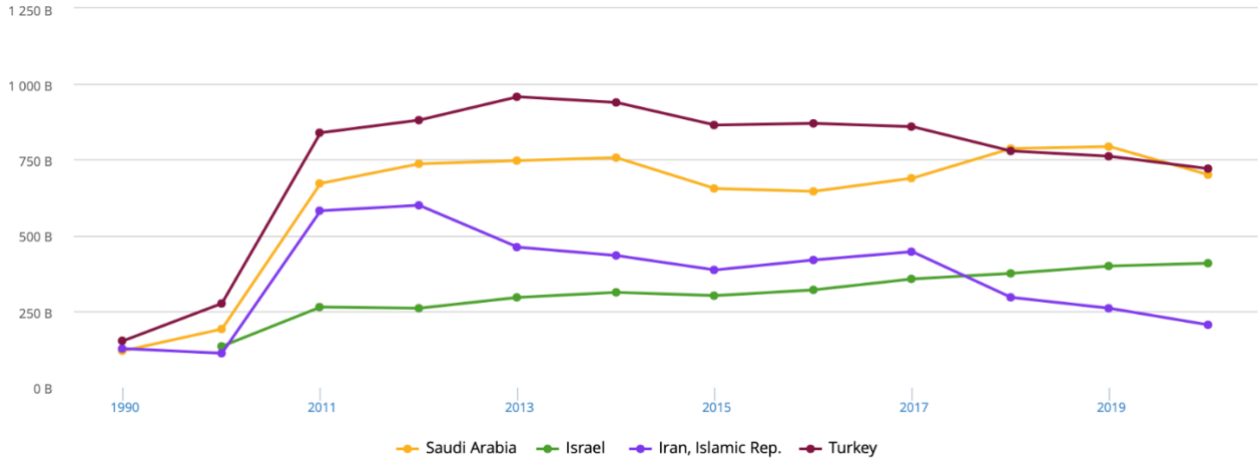
China's Middle East Partnerships

State	Level	Year Signed
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Turkey	Strategic Partnership	2010
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
UAE	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018

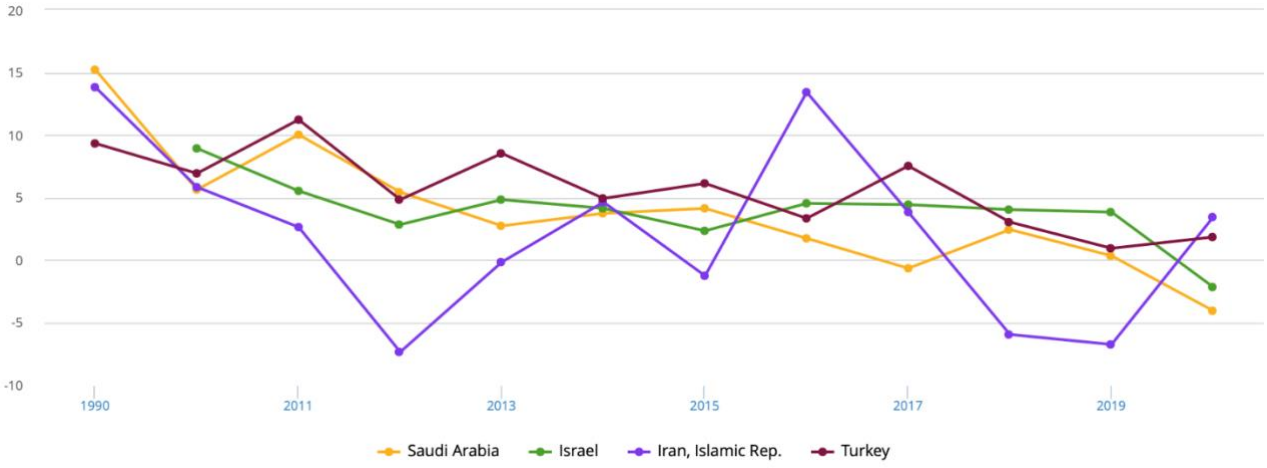
Data source: (Fulton 2019, pp. 3-4)

Appendix E: Some economic indicators for Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and Turkey

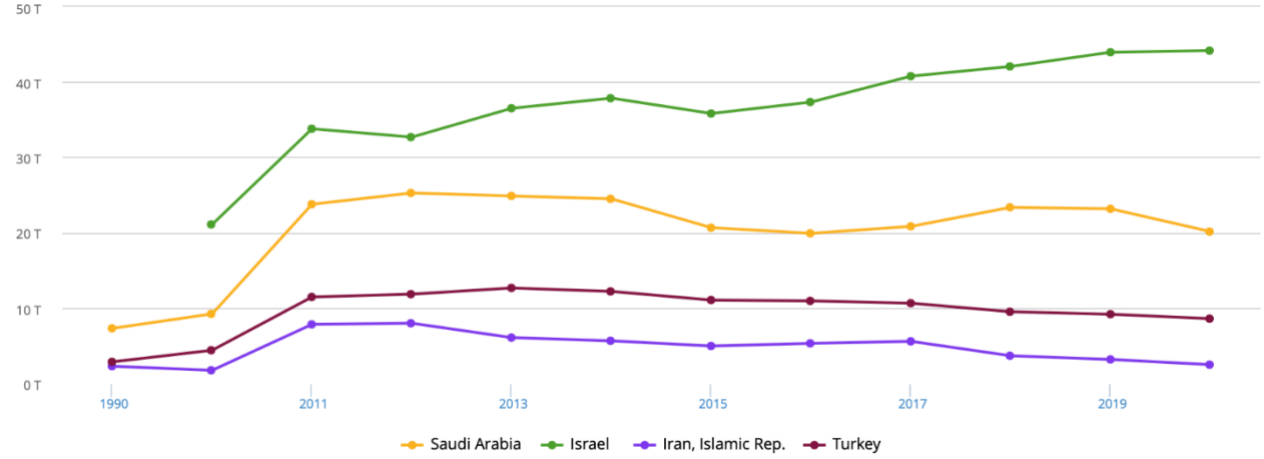
E-1: GDP (current US$)



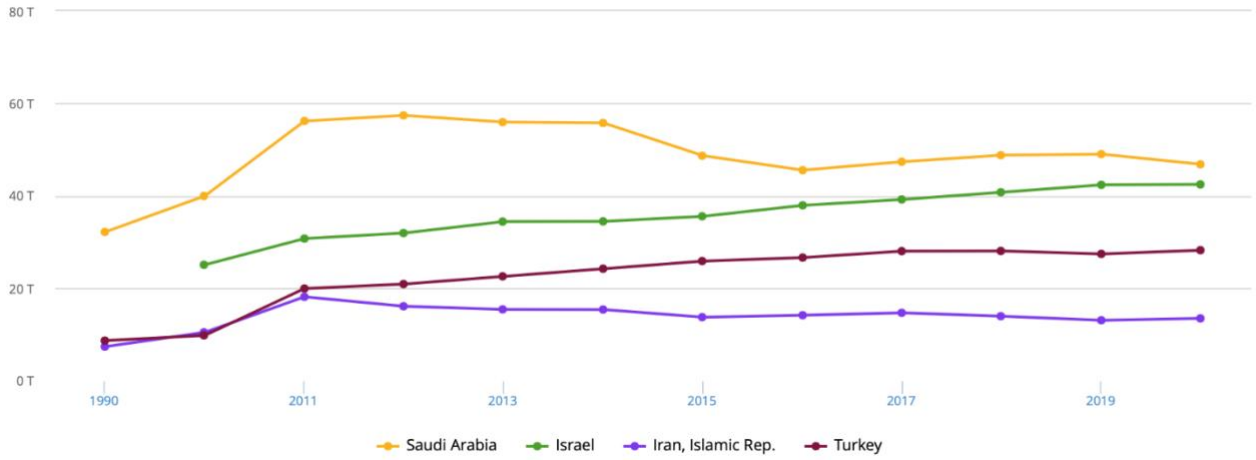
E-2: GDP growth (annual %)



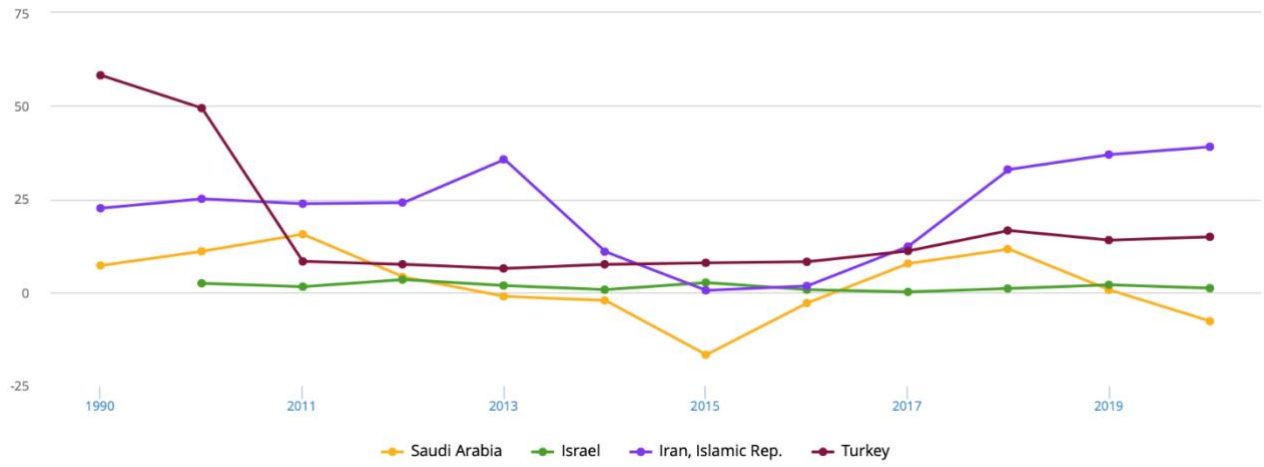
E-3: GDP per Capita (current US $)



E-4: GDP per Capita, PPP (Current international US$)



E-5: Inflation, GDP deflator (annual US$)



Source: World Bank (2021)

Appendix F: United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran's Military expenditure in 2020

Rank (globally)	Country	Spending ($ b.)	Spending as a share of GDP (%)	World share (%)	
1	United States	778	3.7	39	
2	China	252	1.7	13	
				World share (%)	Middle East share (%)
6	Saudi Arabia	57.5	8.4	2.9	38.1
14	Israel	21.7	5.6	1.1	12.6
16	Turkey	17.7	2.8	0.9	12.6
18	Iran	15.8	2.2	0.8	7.8

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020)