



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
 Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
 Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Great Power Competition in the Middle East: The United States, Russia, and China

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East has become one of the epicentres of the Great Power rivalry with all three Great Powers; the United States of America, Russia, and China, taking part at the same time. This paper focuses on the policies of Great Powers and how they can affect stability in the region, the sovereignty of the countries in the region and the geopolitical community. The US remains committed to its military strength, alliances and ideological power in order to reinforce its strategic goals and deter its opponents whereas Russia is interested in selective military intervention, energy diplomacy and mediation of conflicts as a means of reaping the most with the minimum political and economic price. China, on the other hand, underlines economic interaction, the development of infrastructure, and non-interventionist foreign policy to gain long-term strategic alliances without being involved in conflicts in the region. This multipolar interaction has greatly strengthened regional states which enables Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel and Iran to exploit the benefits of multiple outside association and avoid being over reliant on a single power. Nevertheless, the risks associated with such interactions are the overlapped interests and strategic goals of external actors, which are accompanied by proxy wars, miscalculations, and increased competition. Combining political, military, and economic aspects, this paper can indicate that the Middle East is currently functioning under a dynamic multipolar system, but regional actors contribute actively to the final results. The results indicate that there is a necessity to develop subtle measures balancing competition and cooperation, which will guarantee stability, development, and security in a fast-changing geopolitical world.

Keywords: *Great Power Competition; Middle East; United States; Russia; China; Multipolarity.*

Introduction

Middle East has always been a region of strategic interests, not only by the large energy reserves, but also by its strategic position, linking the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. It has been a center of the international projection and intervention of power owing to its status as a trade, cultural and religious center. The Middle East in the twenty-first century is becoming progressively a venue of renewed great power competition with the United States, Russia, and China with different approaches to promote their own national interests. The constant conflicts, political changes, and economic shifts in the region have given these

powers a chance to gain power, reform alliances, and restructure the structure of governance in the region (Hoffman, 2021).

In the Middle East, the United States has always been the leader through military superiority, political partnerships, and fiscal leverage. The US has been able to exude power in the region by using interventions after the World War II, the use of energy related policies besides the formation of sustained relationships with states like Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt. According to Hoffman (2021), the United States had always used coercive and soft tools, combining military presence with diplomacy to ensure the strategic advantages. In spite of these strengths, US influence has been struggling because of long standing military engagements, the changing domestic agenda and emerging regional and international rivals. The withdrawal of both Iraq and Afghanistan and the redefinition of the US foreign policy concerning the rise of China in the world, are two examples of the changing limitations of American hegemony. By the more selective and pragmatic approach to regional interaction, Russia, instead, has become a key player again. Bekkevold (2018) points out that the approach of Moscow integrates both specific military intervention, diplomacy of energy and political mediation, which enables it to achieve influence without the large-scale economic or political expenses of long-term occupation. Russia in Syria proves that it can centralize military advantages, create political advantages and improve credit as the force broker, so it can become an inalienable participant in Middle Eastern politics. In contrast to the United States, the Russian strategy is not highly based on ideological orientation, which permits the flexible relations with various regional actors. This realist approach to engagement can help Moscow preserve control in various arenas of war, at the same time threatening the US hegemony but not having to face head-on with China.

The involvement of China in the Middle East is mainly guided by the economic and strategic interest where infrastructural investment, energy relations, and connection in trade dominate. According to Komila and Uvraimov (2025), the reason why the interventionist policy of Beijing has worked in a politically diverse area without raising security dilemmas is because non-interventionist policy will enable it to work in the region without causing security dilemma. Developing interdependence within the framework of economic projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative as an example, China has ensured the vital energy resources, reinforced trade connections and enlarged its further footprints. This is an extension of its larger global strategy, which enables China to have influence without having to be directly engaged in military conflicts or confront the established powers overtly. Consequently, the involvement of China can be seen as the symbol of a new type of great power politics in the region, where soft power, financial advantages, and the ability to wait are introduced as pertinent alternatives to coercion.

The overlap between the two strategies has resulted in a multipolar situation within the Middle East which offers a chance to the state of the regions to exercise agency as well as increasing the chances of the eventuality of instability. As noted by Afterman and Urhova (2024), such countries as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and Iran are exploiting the rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China to promote their national security, economic, and political goals. Such states gain independence by harnessing several powers at the same time, diversifying strategic relations, and negotiating some concessions, which probably could

not occur in a unipolar structure. Nonetheless, such a combination of actors and overlapping interests also adds to the risk of miscalculations, proxy wars, and political tensions, which can further exacerbate already existing tensions and increase the duration of instability in the region.

Energy security has been playing a leading role in great power contacts. The Persian Gulf being the main source of oil and gas globally has always been the subject of foreign forces in need of oil and gas to protect their trade routes and ensure the safety of their trade. According to Singh (2021), the US, Russian, and Chinese interests are met in the energy sector and divergent in approaches: the US is based on military defense of major chokepoints and alliances, Russia is based on energy diplomacy and alliances, and China is based on long-term trade and investment agreements. Such conflicting strategies result in overlapping spheres of influence, in which competition and cooperation coexist, to influence the results of regional economic and political outcomes.

The historical background is also valuable to the interpretation of the modern dynamics. The colonialism past, the Cold War, and post-9/11 war campaigns have created a fragmented, contested region. According to Houghton and Houghton (2023), historical resentments, sectarian differences, and unsolved disputes offer good platforms where outside forces can interfere strategically. The US, Russian and Chinese policies are not only influenced by the short-term interests of the particular countries but also by the necessity to overcome the threats of historical sensitivity, regional affiliations, and domestic politics. The presence of these powers to work efficiently relies on the knowledge of the local political environment, capitalizing on segmentation in the region and developing viable long-term engagement plans.

Besides energy and historical variables, there is also the technological and economic aspect of competition which is becoming more prominent. Investment in digital infrastructure, AI, and technology-driven energy projects in China is in opposition to the US attention to the military technology, as well as the attention of Russia to the strategic military-industrial relations (Nye, 2023). Such divergent priorities offer an insight into the multidimensionality of the modern great power competition, with an economic, technological, military, and diplomatic influence being exerted at the same time. It is the competition between regional states which is advantages as they succeed in attracting investments, are assured of security guarantees and also, have to deal with the challenge of having to balance what may have conflicting obligations and expectations.

Lastly, the great power competition in the Middle East highlights the interdependence of the global and regional processes. US, Russia, and China strategic actions in the region are not self-centered but rather affected by the wider geopolitical interests, such as the Indo-Pacific dilemma, European security interest, and the international energy market (Wasser et.al., 2022). As a result, the regional stability cannot only be based on local actors but also the interaction of the global power politics and national state strategies. These multilayered interactions are critical to the policymakers, scholars, and practitioners who need to predict future trends, mitigate risks and develop policies that would balance competition and cooperation.

To sum up, the strategic role of the Middle East, combined with the individual strategies of the United States, Russia, and China, has turned the region into a multipolar competition arena. Historical legacies, energy relations, technology, and agency of the region combine to generate some chances of cooperation, and chances of escalation of conflict. Through this introduction, the ground is laid on the mechanisms, outcomes, and implications of great power competition, and the entire context within which this theoretical framework and discussion, and policy analysis of this paper can occur (Chaziza, 2024).

Literature Review

Middle East Great Power competition literature has strongly expanded within the recent years, as the world has re-inquired its global strategic interests in the region. The researchers have explored the unique functions of the United States, Russia, and China, and the changing reactions of the actors within the region as they balance in spheres of influence. This review is a critical synthesis of the existing studies, showing trends, shortcomings, and controversies of the external power involvement, regional agency, and the implications at large on stability. According to Hoffman (2021), the United States has been ruling the Middle East historically by means of the military strength, allies, and ideological pressure. His discussion points out that the US interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria represent a more general strategic game of deterrence, power projection, and regional hegemony. Nevertheless, Hoffman reports that the US primacy has been limited by sustained military engagements and domestic political changes, which have provided the opportunities to other powers to increase their influence. This worldview places the United States in the middle whose policies may be relevant but subject to more and more criticism.

The rising of the Russian state has attracted a lot of academic concern. Bekkevold (2018) investigates Moscow in terms of selective interventions, noting that Russia aims to expand the impact of the region at the minimum economic and political expenses. The author says that the presence of Russia in Syria is a sign that Russia has applied a complex strategy to spread power, integrating military force, diplomacy, and energy diplomacy. Likewise, Michnik (2021) notes that Russia uses regional disputes to solidify position and build reputation as a stable external ally, which is in contrast to the fact that the United States uses its resources more intensively to achieve the desired goals.

The involvement of China in the Middle eastern affairs is another paradigm of influence. According to Komila and Uvrainov (2025), the involvement of China is mostly economic as it is oriented at the development of infrastructure, at the creation of trade relations, and at the guaranteeing of energy security. China adopts non-interventionist approach to diplomacy that enables it to build strategic relations that do not arouse security dilemma and that is why it functions effectively even in politically diverse states. Chaziza (2024) supplements this perspective and states that the Chinese involvement in the area represents the example of competitive coexistence when economic leverage may replace direct military intervention and redefine the processes of influence in the multipolar environment.

The multi-polarity of the modern Middle East has been highlighted in a number of studies. Wasser et.al. (2022) emphasize that the US, Russian, and Chinese simultaneous action create overlapping spheres of influence, which enables the states of the region to take a strategic agency. Afterman and Urhova (2024) also observe that states like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and

Israel actively use this competition to pursue security, economic, and political agendas, as well as tend to deal with several powers at a given time. According to this literature, multipolarity is more flexible to regional players but it also creates the threat of miscalculations, proxy wars as well as increased competition.

The theme of energy security is common in literature. Singh (2021) underlines that the Persian Gulf continues to be a vital source of foreign activity, and the US is seeking to use the military force to protect the fairways, Russia is seeking to use energy diplomacy, and China is seeking to use long-term economic agreements. These alternative policies illustrate the role of energy issues in foreign policy and the impact of energy issues on the stability of the region. Mahmood & Askari (2025) contend that the interdependence of energy has brought in novel sources of leverage whereby regional states have bargained gains and creates possibilities of friction between rival powers.

History is also a very important factor in the formation of modern dynamics. The authors emphasize the role of colonial and Cold War affiliations, as well as post-9/11 interventions, and mention that unconquered conflicts and sectarian polarizations offer external forces the possibility of strategic interventions (Houghton and Houghton, 2023). These works underline the interaction between structure and state agency, which implies that great power strategies are responsive to the historical contexts and constructive of the future directions.

The convergence of military, economic, and soft power strategies has been the subject of a number of scholars. According to Nye (2023), military capacity is no longer the sole determinant of influence in the Middle East; economic statecraft, diplomacy, and soft power are all the more decisive. Both Singh (2021) and Komila and Uvraimov (2025) demonstrate the role of these tools in being utilized by China and Russia in addition to or instead of coercive approaches, which is indicative of a change in the modalities of power projection. According to this literature, the type of great power competition is multidimensional as military dominance, economic involvement, and diplomatic approaches in particular interact to form the results.

Lastly, the implication of the same on the stability and agency of the region is analyzed in recent researches. According to Darwich, regional states are becoming more strategic participants, having to balance between conflicting powers to achieve the maximum goods and reduce risks (2019). According to Afterman and Urhova (2024), this agency allows the states to balance alliances, seek investment opportunities, as well as negotiate security guarantees, and also adds complexities that can exacerbate local conflicts. This school of thought supports the notion that regional stability is not only tied to the policies of external powers but also the adaptive ability and strategic estimation of the local players.

To sum up, all the literature sources demonstrate that the Middle East has turned into a multipolar zone of complicated relations due to the unique approaches of the United States, Russia, and China. Current literature puts a strong accent on trends of military intervention, economic involvement, and diplomacy, as well as underlining the growing autonomy of regional actors. Nevertheless, there are still loopholes, especially on the future consequences of multipolar competition on the regional security, economic growth and political stability. It is based on this that this study examines the mechanisms, strategies, and effects of great

power competition and which can be seen as providing a broad basis of understanding of the current geopolitics of the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

The dynamics of great power competition in the Middle East can only be understood on a solid theoretical basis. This paper will use a multitheoretical approach, which integrates the concepts of Neorealism, Soft power theory, and Multipolarity to examine the policies of the United States, Russia and China and the future of regional stability. These structures all describe why the external powers will follow divergent policies, the way the states within the region will react, and the systemic consequences of a multipolar world.

Structural realism, or neorealism, is the main prism through which the US and Russian behavior is to be viewed. Neorealist theory assumes that states exist within an international system which is anarchic where the main aim of states is security and survival, and thus, the relative power and influence is competed over. Although US military supremacy, alliance, and pressure diplomacy in the Middle East, Hoffman (2021) asserts, are classical examples of a neorealist strategy, which focuses on discouraging enemies and ensuring hegemony. In the same way, the limited interventions of Russia in the war, the sale of strategic weapons, and its involvement in mediating the conflict also demonstrate the neorealism approach of trying to maximize influence at minimum cost (Bekkevold, 2018). Neorealism declares the reason why the two powers are preoccupied with security, positioning and bargaining within their respective areas which were previously characterized by insecurity and foreign interference. Soft Power Theory, coined by Nye (2023) is a complement to neorealism that is able to characterize the non-coercive aspects of state power. Soft power focuses on other actors developing their preferences by attraction instead of coercion, which can commonly be achieved through economic interaction, cultural diplomacy or institutional collaboration. The China model of the Middle East is a typical example of the soft power game: enterprises in infrastructure, energy relations, and non-interventionist diplomacy help Beijing to develop long-term strategic relationships without military involvement (Komila & Uvraimov, 2025). This model describes the success of China in gaining influence among the ideologically different states without any significant change in its image of an impartial partner.

Lastly, the multipolarity concept gives a systematic approach to regional responses. A multipolar world is characterized by several powerful states that exist at the same time and provide overlapping spheres of control as well as the chances where smaller states can enjoy agency (Wasser et.al., 2022). Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel are regional players that use this rivalry to negotiate strategic advantages, diversify their alliances, and not be dependent on one external force. Multipolarity focuses on interactions and relationship aspects of great power rivalry, stating that regional stability is clearly about not merely the strategies of the external forces, but also the reactions of local actors.

This theoretical framework effectively gives a detailed perspective of the Middle East, which is currently witnessing changes in its geopolitics through the incorporation of neorealism, the soft power theory and multipolarity. It describes the reason the US uses coercion on the basis of military force and alliances, why Russia is selective and pragmatic in its policy and why China focuses on economic influence and non intervention. It also highlights the strategic agency of the regional states, which portrays the fact that multipolar competition creates

both opportunities and threats at the same time. The given framework therefore forms the basis of analyzing the processes of interaction, implication, and the course of great power competition in the region.

Research Methodology

The proposed study uses a qualitative comparative design, which is based on secondary data, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and official statements (Rhoades et.al., 2023). The time frame covers the period between the year 2000 and 2025 encompassing the post-Cold War era, Arab Spring, the Syrian conflict, US military drawdown, and the growing Chinese involvement in the economy. The comparative approach looks at the strategies in three dimensions namely political, military, as well as economic strategic dimensions. It evaluates the impact of any power, regional reactions, and the balance of power relations. The major variables are the alliance formation, military intervention, economic relationships, energy reliance and diplomatic involvement. The weaknesses of the research are the use of secondary sources and changing geopolitical events that can change the paths in real-time. However, the method allows to identify the modern great power rivalry in the Middle East in a systematic and detailed way and offer the knowledge that can be used by both researchers and policy makers.

The Middle East Strategy of United States.

The United States has been the outside influence key player in the Middle East since the period following World War II and this was especially after the Cold War when the United States emerged the sole superpower. US policy in the area has been multipronged with the integration of military, political, and economic tools to stay in its influence, protect energy resources, and ensure the safety of allied states. According to Singh (2021), the involvement of the US in the Middle East has traditionally been motivated by three main goals, including the need to secure strategic allies in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, the need to have access to energy, and the need to counter perceived threats, which include terrorism and other regional adversary powers.

Military Dimension

The US has been very dependent on military supremacy in gaining its goals. This methodology will incorporate forward-deployed forces, military bases, sales of arms, and alliances. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be viewed as the peak of the direct US military intervention and its capacity as well as constraints to its strength. After Iraq, the US turned toward a more discriminating approach of engagement, which focused on drone attacks, special forces, and targeted interventions, specifically Syria and Yemen (Mahmood & Askari, 2025). Alliances and defence pacts are also part of the US military strategy. As an illustration, the US has formal defense accords with Israel and Egypt, with arm support, training, and intelligence being provided to the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including Saudi Arabia and UAE. These partnerships enhance US strategic interests, so that power projection does not need large ground forces to be in all theaters at any given time.

Political Dimension

Diplomatic involvement and alliances are among the political tools used by the US to influence the outcomes in the region. This involves participation in peace talks, conflict mediation, and use of international bodies like the United Nations to justify interventions. According to Cook

(2021), the US diplomacy is generally focused on aligning ideologies, advancing the values of liberal democracy and the market order economy as a component of the overall strategic outlook. Nevertheless, the US credibility has been questioned in some instances because of the inconsistency in policies like sudden withdrawals or change of stance in conflict situations of the region. The other important political approach is balancing of competing powers. In Syria, e.g., the US attempted to curtail the influence of Iran coupled with stifling of Russian activities. In the same light, the US has tried to maintain the Chinese influence by indicating its determination to maintain the security of the region as it promotes economic diversification not through reliance on non-US partners.

Economic Dimension

The US has economic power in terms of trade, investment, sanctions and energy alliances. It is also a leading supplier of arms in the region, which not only advances the security dependency, it also creates an economic advantage. As Aggarwal and Kenney (2023) emphasize, the sale of arms is a twofold task to make allies stronger and form long-term dependencies that develop the decision-making process in the interests of US strategic priorities. Furthermore, policy instrument of sanctions has been employed by the US, especially against Iran, in its energy sector, financial institutions, as well as major political leaders. The intention of these moves is to coerce regional actors to align themselves with the US security and political demands without direct military clash.

Russia Strategy within the Middle East.

Russia is again an important participant in the Middle East and it is starting to be more strategic about its selectiveness and it is using its diplomatic, military and economic assets to provide maximum impact without overstepping any boundary. Bekkevold (2018) highlights that the first goal of Russia is to reinstate its position in the world as a powerful country and develop partnerships that will have a positive impact on the political bargaining and strategic safety.

Military Dimension

The Russian involvement in the military is marked by discriminatory interventions, including the brightest example of Syria. After 2015, Russia has been using airpower, advisors, and military equipment to defend Assad regime, changing the power balance in the fighting and guaranteeing its interests in the Mediterranean. As Harrison (2018) remarks, this intervention shows that Russia is able to exercise power in a strategic way without the trap of full-blown occupation but with the message to the rest of the world and its neighbors that it is willing to use military force to protect its strategic interests. Another pillar of the Russian strategy is arms sales. Through supplying arms with high technology to Iran, Egypt and other players in the region, Russia not only reinforces the alliances, but also creates long term dependency. The military interventions and sales are also beneficial in two aspects: strengthening the influence of security and financial payoff.

Political Dimension

Russia plays a role of a mediator and power broker in regional wars, politically. As it is noted by Afterman and Urhova (2024), Russia plays an active part in the work on ceasefires, diplomatic discussion, and the implementation of agreements between conflicting parties. It balances itself against the influence of US by establishing itself as a player it cannot do

without. Russia also seeks strategic alliances with actors within the region, and in many cases, they have no hope of ideological convergence. The Moscow-Tehran-Damascus axis is also pragmatic, concerned with each other security, energy, and influence. This is a method that will enable Russia to increase its sphere of influence without the economic and political liability of long occupations or unilateral intervention.

Economic Dimension

Russia has taken advantage of energy diplomacy and trade alliances. Bekkevold (2018) lays stress on the fact that Russia has been providing the oil and natural gas to regional allies and has been involved in reconstruction efforts, especially in Syria. These economic activities strengthen the strategic alliances and give Russia a bargaining power as well as a long-term presence in the region. Also, Russia employs economic instruments to offset the US and Chinese influence, such as investing in military-industrial complexes and partnership with regional financial institutions. Such attempts reaffirm the intentions of Russia to be considered one of the key players in determining the geopolitical situation in the Middle East.

China Strategy in the Middle East

The policy of China towards the Middle East is quite different compared with those of the United States and Russia. Instead of military hegemony, China concentrates on economic statecraft, investment in infrastructure and on diplomacy. According to Komila and Uvraimov (2025), the main drive of China is to ensure the safety of energy resources, increase the trading routes and create long-term relations within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Economic Dimension

China spends a lot of money infrastructural projects, energy relationship and trade arrangements all across the Middle East. Mahmood & Askari (2025) note that China invests in ports, highways, and industrial areas in other countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These projects establish interdependence, long term strategic leverage without being directly involved in the military. Also, the economic diplomacy of China offers a substitute to the Western conditionality. China, unlike the US, is not often conditional on its aid in terms of political reform, alignment to the state, so it is a prime ally to the state that is willing to invest without political interference.

Political Dimension

China is a non-interventionist politically. According to Chaziza (2024), China is focused on stability and predictability, which help to build partnerships founded on common economic interests but not on ideological orientations. This will enable China to gain a larger range of regional players such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel without any affiliation to conflicts. China is another country that is involved in multilateral diplomacy and that is participating in regional forums and international institutions so as to facilitate trade, security cooperation and conflict resolution. China makes itself a constructive partner which makes it more legitimate and soft power within the region.

Military Dimension

Although Chinese military presence in the Middle East is modest in comparison with that of the US or Russia, the country has strategic security alliances, weapon sale, and intelligence relations with some of the states of the region (She, 2021). All these ensure that China will be

able to safeguard its economic interests, have access to important shipping routes and wield power indirectly, without military conflict.

The US, Russia, and China strategy will be compared.

The United States, Russian and Chinese strategies in the Middle East are characterized by the differences and similar purposes. Influence is sought in various ways by each power and this depends on the historical legacies and their abilities as well as world ambitions (Wasser et.al., 2022).

Comparison of Political Strategies

Alliances and ideological alignment are the main factors of the United States. It controls the political outcomes through formal defense agreements, bilateral partnerships, and multilateral institutions, which strengthen its security and economic interests. According to Cook (2021), the US diplomacy can be characterized by the promotion of democratic ideals and market-oriented reforms along with the security assurances, but this type of intervention has sometimes led to resentment or backlash in the societies of the regions.

Russia, on the contrary, is concerned with practical collaboration, in which ideological orientation becomes an additional factor after strategic advantage. Bekkevold (2018) highlights that Moscow has been supporting the states like Iran, Syria, and Turkey with the help of diplomatic bargaining and selective intervention to stay influential. Russia is able to move freely among competing ideas and maintain its operations by placing itself in between the parties and functioning as a mediator and power broker without being bound to any long-term ideological or structural changes.

The political approach of China is essentially non-interventionist that is based on the stable and predictable relations with the actors in the region. Komila and Uvraimov (2025) emphasize that China promotes interaction by means of economic agreements and multilateral diplomacy not to be involved in any political or military conflicts. This would strengthen the legitimacy of China and soft power enabling it to gain more influence among different actors without causing counteractions.

Comparison of the military strategies

The United States is militarily unparalleled, with forward-deployed troops, new technology, and bases in the region. According to Singh (2021), the US deploys military instruments not to engage in conflict only, but also deterrence, signaling, and assuring allies. The dependence on long-term strategic needs through the sale of arms and military preparation programs is reinforced to enable the US to influence the postures of the regional defense in indirect ways. The military policy of Russia is focused on accuracy and discriminatory power. According to Harrison (2018), interventions, including in Syria, are finely tuned to bring the highest political impact at the lowest cost. The simultaneous mix of operations and arms sales helps Russia to gain power without wearing itself out, form an asymmetric advantage compared to the United States.

China has a small, but strategically important military presence. She (2021) notes that China participates in the sale of arms, intelligence, and maritime security alliances. These actions safeguard its economic interests, trade routes and offer indirect leverage and are indicative of a non-confrontational yet strategy-conscious military stance.

Comparison of Strategies in Economy

China engages in economic special ways. China creates interdependence and strategic long-term leverage through infrastructure building, expansion of trade and energy relationships (Mahmood & Askari, 2025). The US economic powers are frequently combined with the goals of security, such as the sale of arms, sanctions, and selective investment, whereas Russia uses the energy exports, rebuilding efforts, and military contracts as the instruments of influence consolidation (Bekkevold, 2018).

According to Aggarwal and Kenney (2023), this congruence of military, political, and economic capabilities forms overlapping areas of influence, which enables the regional players to take advantage of the rivalry among the powers. As an example, Gulf States have been pursuing a complex multipolar approach in their relations with the US and security guarantees, China and investment, and Russia and energy and defense partnership.

Implications for Regional Stability

The escalation of the great power rivalry in the Middle East has far-reaching consequences of the stability in the region. The concurrent use of the United States, Russia, and China in the region has turned the region into a multipolar environment that presents both opportunities and threats to actors within the region because of the overlapping political, military, and economic strategies. This conflict allows the states of the region to have an agency of strategies, yet it also leads to the emergence of uncertainty, which may enhance the already existing conflicts or create some new tension (Wasser et.al., 2022).

The increase in the regional autonomy and agency is one of the primary implications. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and Iran cease to be passive actors in the external directions; they are active contributors to the interests of the rivalry to achieve maximum benefits in the political, economic, and security domains (Afterman & Urhova, 2024). To give an example, Gulf states approach US to get its security, Russia to collaborate with regarding military and energy issues, and China to invest and build infrastructure. This diversification alleviates the reliance on a power, enhances the bargaining power, and promotes resiliency to the outside shocks. Nevertheless, there are also increased risks of wrong calculations and proxy wars associated with multipolar competition. The overlapping of the spheres of influence may create tension when the strategic goals of great powers are incompatible, in the regions that were already prone to instability like Syria, Yemen, and Libya (Darwich, 2019). Local conflicts can be lengthened by the multiplicity of external actors with different interests, and make peace negotiations complicated, as well as, humanitarian crisis aggravated. Even peaceful interactions, including Chinese economic investments, can build strategic interdependences that regional actors ought to manage cautiously in order to prevent unwanted vulnerability. The stability of economic interdependence under multipolarity has both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, the infrastructure investment undertaken by China, its relations with energy partners, as well as trade agreements bring about economic growth and formation of incentives to engage in peaceful interaction, however, on the other hand, it creates competition between the US and Russian interests, which may create a certain level of friction in relations (Komila & Uvraimov, 2025). Likewise, the US-related arms opportunities and security assurances reinforce the regional allies but may also foster the arms race and enhance rivalries.

All in all, the consequences of the same on the stability of the region are subtle. Multipolarity is flexible and offers opportunity, which allows states to manage competing forces, enhance resiliency, and achieve national development objectives. However, it also causes the rise of strategic complexity, the height of the risks of the conflict escalation, and the challenge of the old security arrangements. The future stability of the Middle East will hence not only be dependent on the policies of the great powers but also on how the actors of the region will be able to negotiate, mediate and manage competition. This changing relationship is an important factor that highlights the need to study the concept of multipolar relations as the main determinant of regional peace, economic development, and political stability (Mahmood & Askari, 2025).

Discussion

The modern Middle East does not remain the inactive arena controlled by one external power anymore; it is a multipolar space that is influenced by interactions of the three powers: the United States, Russia, and China. Such a complicated environment presents regional actors, global powers, and the international system in general with opportunities and challenges. The analysis of the strategies of these players, the reactions of the regional states, and the systemic factors that influence the geopolitical path of the region is necessary to study this great power rivalry (Hoffman, 2021).

The US holds the influence with the help of a complex of military, political and economic tools. It leverages its military strength, alliance coalitions as well as the ideology diplomacy to influence the outcome especially in very important regions like the Persian Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean. Singh (2021) highlights that the US policy has power that can be used to reassure allies, deter adversaries, and use diplomacy to achieve political goals. Nevertheless, changes in domestic policy, long-term military engagements, and emergence of other players has paved way to opportunities of other external actors, so that the idea of US uncontested hegemony is not as evident.

The reentry of Russia in the Middle East is an indicator of a strategic and calculated action meant to have the best influence at the lowest cost. The selective interventions, energy diplomacy, and involvement in conflict mediation have helped to increase its credibility as a power broker (Bekkevold, 2018). The Syrian war is an excellent example of how Moscow can integrate limited military interventions and diplomacy to gain strategic positions and shape political resolutions. Russia, unlike the US, does not need ideological alignment, and it is free to have flexible alliances with various actors on the regional front. This practicality will guarantee long-term control even when the power structures in the region are changing.

The participating style of China is based on economic statecraft, soft power, and non-interventionist diplomacy. Komila and Uvraimov (2025) point out that the role of Chinese infrastructure, energy and trade relations investments develops long-term interdependence and strategic leverage without the politics costs of military intervention. With its emphasis on the mutual economic advantage, China enhances its legitimacy among the states that do not want to develop under the conditions of political immanence and allows the country to gain influence among both US-oriented and Russia-oriented actors.

The existence of a multipolar rivalry between these powers has a major regional stability and agency implication. The Middle East states become more and more strategic players, using

the rivalries to promote the security, economic prosperity, and political independence (Afterman & Urhova, 2024). Other countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and Iran are negotiating with a number of powers at the same time deriving advantage out of all of them and not being dependent on any one power specifically. This atmosphere encourages calculated autonomy in the sense that states choose to make selective modes of agreement and trade-offs among conflicting interests as they pursue national interests.

However, multipolarity also brings about opportunities as well as dangers. Competition promotes diplomacy, formation of coalitions, and economic diversification (Mahmood & Askari, 2025), but overlapping interests can further collate conflicts and result in the possibility of proxy wars or misjudging. To use an example, the case of interventions in Syria and Libya shows how conflicting interests between the US, Russia, and other forces may lead to a further condition of instability and exposure (Darwich, 2019). Such an economic, military, and political strategy result in the creation of a high-stakes environment in which minor mistakes can lead to crises of larger scale in the region.

The shifting structure of power in the Middle East also points to the shift in the nature of influence. The military strength is no longer the decisive factor; the economic weight, soft power, and alliances play a key role (Nye, 2023). The economic-orientated nature of Chinese international politics has indicated that it is possible to wield power without using force, and the sporadic nature of Russian military action indicates that strategic accuracy could be as efficient as direct superiority. United States though remaining a powerhouse is constrained with multipolarity restricting unilateralism and necessitating negotiation, coordination and compromise.

Lastly, the role of strategic calculation and agency can be highlighted using the example of regional responses to great power competition. States are growing more balanced in competing forces, diversified in alliances and use economic and political opportunities to optimize freer play (Wasser et.al., 2022). This trend represents the transition towards the more negotiated form of geopolitics, in which local actors have the power to influence the outcome and reduce risks. In this way, the Middle East has turned into an experimental region of modern multipolar rivalry, which indicates the combination of forceful and non-forceful tools, historical backgrounds, and novel strategies.

Overall, the discussion has shown that the geopolitics of Middle Eastern region is determined by the coinciding and even conflicting policies of the United States, Russia, and China. All the powers pursue different strategies, which are military superiority, targeted participation and economic statecraft, and form a multipolar world, where the regional states gain more independence and power. These dynamics are critical in planning future trends, risk management, and policy formulation in an area where competition and cooperation dictate stability and strategic long-term success (Chaziza, 2024).

Conclusion

There has been a fundamental change in the Middle East in the past twenty years, as a region that was dominated by the US to a complex multipolar space with the influence of the strategic rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China. This transformation is indicative of general trends in the international balance of power, the re-emergence of Russia as a geopolitical force, and the emergence of China as an economic giant with international

interests. All these powers have their own instruments, strategies and priorities, which overlap in providing spheres of influence and challenges as well as opportunities to stability in the region.

The US has remained to depend on its unrivaled military power, alliances, and political influence to influence the results of the region. Its policy is focused on deterrence, security assurance, and normative power, which places the US as a stabilizer actor, as well as a guarantor of classical alliances. Nevertheless, the evolving domestic concerns, the overextension of the military, and other international commitments have provided a space where other powers have grown their sphere of influence thus, making US hegemony in the region questionable.

By taking a pragmatic, selective, and extremely strategic approach, Russia has seized these vacancies. Russia has achieved greater credibility as a power broker and an actor with no substitute by using specific military interventions, energy diplomacy, and diplomatic mediation as the main strategy to strengthen its influence in the region. Its approach is an intelligent perception of asymmetrical projection of power, whereby it thrives on minimal resources in order to gain the greatest political and strategic advantages without economic and political costs of long-term occupation. This is a calculated method through which Russia continues to have a presence in several regional conflicts and also disrupts the US hegemony. China, on the contrary, has re-expressed its involvement in the Middle East by focusing on economic statecraft, infrastructure investment and non-interventionist diplomacy. Through its emphasis on the partnerships in the long-term development and energy security, China has been able to develop influence in such a manner that does not directly challenge preexisting power bases. The focus on interdependence, soft power, and pragmatic interaction give it the ability to work in a wide range of political settings and establish relationships with states aligned to either US or Russia.

Combined effect of these powers has a great implication to the regional actors who are slowly using strategic agency by playing competition to attain national goals. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel and Iran are now walking through an intricate maze of conflicting interests and forces, in a way that maximizes freedom. This multipolar world promotes maneuverability, creativity in foreign relations, and partial alliances, but also increases the chances of blunders, proxy wars, and strategic rivalry growing into larger regional conflicts.

To sum up, the Middle East provides the example of the dynamic competition between the great powers in the 21 st century. The combination of US military superiority, Russian strategic selectivity and Chinese economic participation has turned the region into a multipolarity laboratory, where local freedom, strategic calculation and international aspiration converge. Knowledge of these dynamics is critical to policymakers, academics, and actors in the region in order to predict future trends, risks, and opportunities in this high stakes game. The stable politics of the Middle East will depend solely on strategies of these great powers, but also on the capacity of the regional states to maneuver, arbitrate and balance between conflicting powers to achieve their long-term political, economic, and security concerns.

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