

Journal of Politics and International Studies

Vol. 12, No. 1, January–June 2026, pp.124–148

Asymmetric Rivalry in a Fragmented Security Complex: Historical Constraints on China-US Competition in the Middle East

Tallat Yasmin 

Lecturer, Department of Political Science & International Relations Government College Women University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: tallatyasmin@gmail.com

Ghulam Mustafa 

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Government College Women University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding: ghulammustafa@gcuf.edu.pk

Abstract

China-US strategic competition increasingly shapes global politics, yet its regional manifestations vary significantly. Why has the increasing competition failed to lead to bipolar realignment in the Middle East? Most existing realist and power-transition schools of thought predict hegemonic substitution whenever a new power faces an existing hegemon. However, despite the increased intensity of Chinese economic participation, the primacy of the United States military remains intact, and no regional actor is willing to commit to exclusive alignment with either power. This article argues that the China-US competition in the Middle East is limited structurally due to the patterns of external penetration that have deep roots in history and have created a fractured regional security complex. The article shows that security externalisation has been institutionalised by colonial fragmentation, Cold War militarization, unipolar interventionism, and post-2011 multipolar layering, which increased the costs of hegemonic transformation. Therefore, the competition is observed in an unequal manner within different spheres: The United States preserves military superiority, but China increases its economic and infrastructure power. This balance is reinforced by regional states through hedging policies that do not allow bipolar consolidation. The results refine power-transition theory by specifying regional structure as an intervening variable and refine RSCT by theorising asymmetric great-power rivalry. The Middle Eastern example shows that systemic rivalry does not necessarily result in bipolarity, but instead that the history of the creation of regional environments influences the level and nature of the great-power rivalry.

Key Words: Great-Power Competition, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), China-US Rivalry, Hedging Strategies, Middle East Geopolitics, Asymmetric Rivalry.

1. Introduction

Strategic competition between the United States and China has become the central organising dynamic of contemporary international politics. In military, technological, economic, and diplomatic spheres, the relationship between the two powers has moved from engagement towards organised competition (Winkler, 2023). The competition in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly marked by alliance consolidation use of military signalling, and institutional balancing, efforts to stabilise flashpoints like the South China Sea and Taiwan have been intensifying with the increasing tensions (CSIS, 2025). Classical realist and power-transition theories hold that rivalry in the system between a hegemon and an emerging power ought to give rise to alignment pressures and facilitating bipolar structuring in strategically salient areas (Mearsheimer, 2014; Waltz, 2014). Since the Middle East is strategically located, rich in energy resources and long accustomed to foreign intervention, it would appear to be a natural stage of increased confrontation. However, patterns of interaction suggest a more complex reality, where there is asymmetric interaction, co-existence through competitive interactions and regional hedging as opposed to a direct reconfiguration of the poles or direct hegemonic replacement (Mahmood & Askari, 2025; Sun et al., 2025).

Although China has been increasing its economic presence as well as diplomatic activism in the Middle East, the US still has vastly superior military capabilities and a vast security structure in the region (Niblock, 2020). China has never aimed to duplicate or directly challenge forward deployment, alliances, or arms-transfer systems of the U.S, but rather focused its activities on building infrastructure, integrating trade, and long-term energy partnerships (Chen et al., 2023; Kelanic, 2025). Current assessments indicate that Beijing remains content to free-ride on US-provided regional security without deep military entanglement or substitute the U.S. position (USCC, 2024).

Simultaneously, regional states have largely avoided binary alignment. Instead of forming rival blocs, they maintain security relationships with the United States while continuing to increase their economic and technological interactions with China (She, 2021; da Vinha, 2022; Wang et al., 2025). The multi-alignment and hedging behaviour, which is observed in the process of the Gulf states balancing the U.S. security guarantees with Chinese investments and partners, adds to the domain differentiation and discourages polarisation (Mahmood & Askari, 2025; Sun et al., 2025).

The resulting dynamic does not fit into the concept of retrenchment or hegemonic substitution but is some form of asymmetric, domain-differentiated rivalry characterised by coexistent competition (Chaziza, 2024; Zhao, 2025). This divergence from conventional theoretical expectations gives rise to the central research question of this study: why has intensifying China-US competition not resulted in hegemonic substitution or bipolar realignment in the Middle East?

Power-transition theory posits that rising powers challenge established hegemons, producing instability and eventual systemic restructuring (Mearsheimer, 2014). When mechanically applied, it foresees a slow decline in the U.S. hegemony and a growing polarisation. However, the existing empirical data suggests that the Middle

Eastern approach by China can be characterised as quite non-militaristic and risk-averse; Beijing is satisfied with enjoying the U.S.-provided security and focuses on the economic and selective forms of engagement instead of direct military displacement (Chen et al., 2023; USCC, 2024). Recent studies underline that no meaningful power transition has been achieved in the region, the absence of the will and ability of China to substitute the U.S. security role, and the behaviour of regional actors complicates the external domination through their autonomy (Scobell, 2024; Zhao, 2025). Simultaneously, the literature that dwells solely on U.S. retrenchment or recalibration does not explain the existence of military primacy and economic competition (Kaye, 2022). Such strategies typically favour changes at the systemic level and under-theorize regional structural features (like historical penetration, institutional fragility and stratified multipolarity) that prevent hegemonic substitution despite the growing competition (USCC, 2024; Zhao, 2025).

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is a more encouraging starting point as it highlights the geographically concentrated interdependence of security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). However, RSCT is not a complete theorisation of how the rivalry between asymmetrically situated great powers takes place within historically penetrated regional systems, conditions under which outside intervention superimposes the ongoing local rivalries, without causing transformative change (Sun et al., 2025). An example of such a scenario is the Middle East, where asymmetric domain differentiation and competitive coexistence outcompete bipolar realignment (Chaziza, 2024).

This article argues that the China–US rivalry in the Middle East is structurally constrained by historically rooted patterns of external penetration that have produced a fragmented regional security complex. Security externalisation has been institutionalised through colonial reconfiguration, proxy militarization of the Cold War, unipolar intervention, and post-2011 multipolar layering and undermined regional integration (Westad, 2005; Kaye, 2022). The historic stratification of costs enhances the price of hegemonic replacement and promotes domain division instead of direct military replacement. Therefore, the competition is asymmetric: The United States maintains military superiority, but China enhances its economic and infrastructural power without challenging the U.S security structure directly (Niblock, 2020; Kelanic, 2025). As a result, competitive coexistence becomes an element of a regionally bound order of history (Chaziza, 2024; Mahmood & Askari, 2025).

This article makes three theoretical contributions. The first contribution develops Regional Security Complex Theory by introducing asymmetric great-power rivalry, thus demonstrating that external penetration is possible without structural reorganisation in the regional order (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The second contribution challenges the deterministic interpretations of the power-transition theory by showing that the involvement of an emerging power is not necessarily followed by a transition to the bipolar system, especially in the cases when the regional security complex is massively fragmented (Waltz, 2014). The third contribution is the synthesis of systemic realism and regional security analysis through incorporation of historical path dependence in the analysis of the contemporary great-power competition. Table 1 summarises the gap between prevailing theoretical expectations and observed outcomes.

Table 1: *Theoretical Expectations Vs Observed China-US Rivalry in the Middle East*

Theory	Predicted Outcome	Observed Reality	Explanation Gap
Power Transition	Hegemonic substitution	Persistent US military dominance	Underestimates regional constraints
Offensive Realism	Bloc formation	Hedging & diversification	Ignores fragmentation
Classical RSCT	External penetration	Multipolar layering	Lacks rivalry asymmetry

2. Theoretical Framework: Extending RSCT for Asymmetric Rivalry

2.1 Regional Security Complex Theory and External Penetration

Regional Security Complex Theory argues that security interaction is geographically concentrated since threats are more easily spread with shorter distances as compared to longer distances (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Consequently, regions are formed as comparatively independent security complexes, whose structure is based on the networks of friendship and hostility between the state neighbours. As much as external great powers can intrude into these complexes, this does not always change the internal architecture of the complex.

The Middle East has always been known as a highly penetrated security complex, characterised by weak regional institutions, high concentration of conflicts, and high levels of outside intervention (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Compared to regional orders that are more institutionalized, the region lacks well-developed collective security institutions that might internalise security management. External actors, therefore, play a stabilising or coercive role most of the time.

However, classical RSCT distinguishes between penetration and overlay. The phenomenon of overlay arises when foreign powers wield such a level of control over the regional security that the dynamics of the indigenous nature are stifled. In comparison, penetration refers to those enduring external interactions that do not annihilate existing antagonisms (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Modern trends in the Middle East are closer to the latter: despite the presence of great powers with significant engagement, the local conflicts not only persist but sometimes even become the cause of the further growth of the conflict (Jones, 2025; Zhao, 2025). The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is not as well developed in its explanations of competition among two asymmetrically placed great powers that exist in a penetrated but not overlaid region. It is particularly acute in the situation with the rivalry between the US and China, where penetration takes place without a transformative overlay (Hazbun, 2024; USCC, 2024). This article builds on RSCT and argues that historical cumulative penetration can create structural limitations that limit hegemonic substitution despite the existence of systemic rivalry (Zhao, 2025).

2.2 Asymmetric Rivalry and Domain Differentiation

Traditional realism assumes that rivalry between major powers centres on military balancing and alliance competition (Walt, 1987). Modern competition is increasingly becoming differentiated in nature, including economic statecraft, technology, infrastructure, and normative influence (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Chaziza, 2024). Such multidimensionality allows the development of rivalry in an unequal way.

Asymmetric rivalry refers to a scenario whereby competing powers have dominated different aspects in the same geopolitical territory, and as a result, there will be less motivation to face each other on the battleground. The US has a unique military presence in the Middle East and numerous allies in the region, but China focuses on trade, energy relations, and infrastructure (Chen et al., 2023; Kelanic, 2025). The level of military balancing is low, but economic interconnectedness is strengthened. Such an arrangement challenges the assumptions of the zero sum that are a part of offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2014). Instead of challenging the same instruments of power, the two actors use partially differentiated toolkits making the rivalry competitive but limited.

The concept of domain differentiation does not override strategic competition: it simply redistributes it. The rise of the technological infrastructure, digital governance, energy supply chains, and investment flows become arenas of projection of influence (Chaziza, 2024). However, since these domains do not directly threaten the established military security assurances, the risks of escalation are relatively limited (Winkler, 2023; Kelanic, 2025).

2.3 Competitive Coexistence as a Structural Outcome

More recent research views the interplay between the United States and the People Republic of China in certain geostrategic terms as competition in coexistence instead of a direct conflict (She, 2021; Chaziza, 2024). Competitive coexistence construct refers to a form of co-existence with rivalry but not systemic change. The paradigm can explain empirical observations in the Middle East as compared to the traditional bipolar models of alignment (Chaziza, 2024).

However, the current understandings often view competitive coexistence as a strategic decision. A structural refinement suggested in this article is that in fragmented security complexes, a competitive coexistence can be achieved not only by means of voluntaristic selection but also as a structurally determined phenomenon. High conflict density, lack of institutional capacity and the regime-survival interests raise the costs of outright confrontation. As a result, outside forces have to act within these parameters (Kelanic, 2025). Therefore, the Middle East not only moderates the rivalry between China and the US, but it preconditions it (Zhao, 2025). External penetration has created over time a regional environment in which hegemonic replacement will require institutional restructuring of a transformative nature, a transformation that neither power seems willing or able to undertake.

2.4 An Extended Model: Asymmetric Rivalry in a Fragmented Security Complex

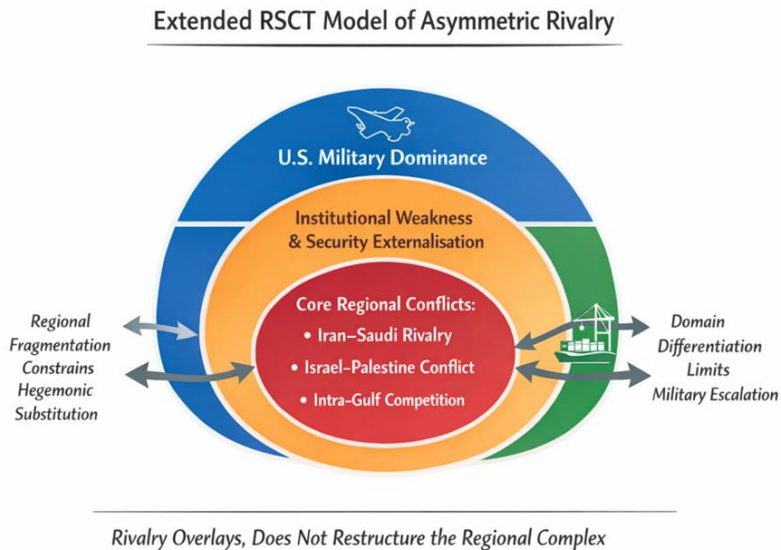
In order to integrate the theoretical components formulated above, an extended model of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) with asymmetric great-power

rivalry is provided in Figure 1. Although classical RSCT views regions in terms of being organised by the structure of security interdependence and external penetration (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), it does not theorise the way competition between asymmetrically positioned great powers occurs within historically penetrated yet non-overlaid complexes (Zhao, 2025; Hazbun, 2024). The proposed model addresses this limitation: structural fragmentation, domain differentiation, and feedback are incorporated into a layered model.

The fundamental aspects of the model are intractable regional disputes such as the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and intra-Gulf rivalry. These competitions form the main force behind the security interdependence in the Middle Eastern security complex. Regions are characterised by patterns of amity and enmity locally produced as RSCT puts it (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These conflicts predate current great-power politics and continue to organise the perception of threats, the calculation of alliances, and military posture (Halliday, 2005). Notably, they are not exogenous to the area or can be explained by external rivalry.

Surrounding this core is a second layer characterised by institutional weakness and security externalisation. Colonial fragmentation and Cold War militarisation have left behind historical traces of bilateral security dependence, yet regional institutional integration has been constrained by the same (Westad, 2005). The ineffective multilateral systems and regime-biased security interests have encouraged dependence on the outside forces to deter and stabilise (Gerges, 2013). This institutional surrounding predisposes the functioning of external penetration: it allows one to be involved without structural change.

The third level in the model is the external penetration nodes, which indicate the differentiated interaction of the United States and China. The US is the country that takes the form of the military-dominant node, and it has been shaped by numerous forward deployments, defence alliances, and security obligations (Kaye, 2022). China occupies the economic-network node, reflecting its growing investment in infrastructure as well as the integration of trade and energy alliances in the region (Chen et al., 2023; USCC, 2024). Most importantly, the nodes are not symmetrically overlapping. Instead of directly challenging the same sources of power, the two actors act in differentiated arenas. Such an imbalance minimizes the incentives to directly displace the military and maintains the aspect of strategy competition (Kelanic, 2025).

Figure 1: *Extended RSCT Model of Asymmetric Rivalry (Author, 2026)*

The model further incorporates two feedback mechanisms that sustain the configuration over time. The first operates between penetration and institutional weakness: external provision of security removes the incentive for regional actors to build collective security institutions, and the resulting institutional deficit renews the demand for external guarantees. Penetration thus reproduces the very fragmentation that makes it possible (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The second operates between domain differentiation and regional hedging: because the two external powers dominate separate domains, regional states can diversify without defecting, and their diversification in turn signals to both powers that direct displacement would be costly and unnecessary (Gerges, 2013). Hedging therefore does not merely respond to asymmetric rivalry; it stabilises it (da Vinha, 2022; Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). In this configuration, asymmetric rivalry emerges not as a temporary deviation but as a structurally conditioned equilibrium (Zhao, 2025).

2.5 Theoretical Implications

The extended framework developed in this article yields three interrelated theoretical propositions that structure the subsequent historical and empirical analysis. The first proposition concerns highly penetrated regional security complexes, where emerging powers are more likely to seek domain-differentiated engagement as opposed to direct military balancing. Where external security provision has become deeply institutionalised and where the level of conflict is high, the costs of direct military rivalry increase significantly. This means that in these circumstances, an increasing power has an incentive to spread its influence by other economic, infrastructural, technological, and diplomatic tools that do not directly challenge established military architectures. Asymmetric rivalry thus does not come as an exception but is a structurally determined consequence.

Second, hegemonic substitution requires institutional change, the hegemonic substitution requires institutional change, rather than only economic growth. The

very economic presence is not a dislocation of the long-standing security order in case the military networks, the obligations of alliances, and the system of deterrence are preserved. To achieve systemic change, an emerging power should change the institutional principles of regional security. This is especially a painful exercise in fractured complexes typified by weak collective institutions and deep-rooted bilateral security arrangements.

Third, regional fragmentation encourages the use of hedging policies and limits the formation of political blocs. In security complexes, which feature overlapping conflicts, regime-based threat perceptions and low institutional cohesion, strategic flexibility is more important than strict alignment among actors on the regional level. Hedging is thus a logical reaction to uncertainty, which allows states to maintain security ties with established powers and at the same time, have economic relations with rising actors. This behaviour reduces the alignment pressures and stabilises the asymmetrical rivalries. These propositions taken together sharpen both power-transition theory and Regional Security Complex Theory, by assuming that regional structure is a mediating variable in systemic rivalry and so offer the conceptual basis of the subsequent historical reconstruction and domain-specific analysis.

3. Historical Path Dependencies and Structural Constraints

3.1 Colonial Fragmentation and the Origins of Structural Vulnerability

The structural foundations of contemporary Middle Eastern insecurity were laid during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent imposition of European colonial rule. The reorganisation of territorial boundaries under British and French mandate systems prioritised imperial strategic interests rather than sociopolitical cohesion, generating state formations that frequently lacked deep institutional legitimacy (Karpav, 1991). Unlike European state formation, which emerged through endogenous processes of bureaucratic consolidation and war-making, many Middle Eastern states inherited externally imposed territorial structures without corresponding institutional integration (Halliday, 2005).

This externally constructed sovereignty produced chronic regime insecurity. Political authority often rested on narrow elite coalitions rather than broad-based social contracts, increasing rulers' dependence on coercive institutions and external support. Therefore, security became externalised early in the region's modern history. Rather than building regional mechanisms for collective security, states increasingly relied on external powers to balance threats and guarantee regime survival (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The colonial phase thus embedded a structural vulnerability that persists: fragmented sovereignty combined with receptivity to external penetration. Importantly, colonial reconfiguration did not eliminate local rivalries; instead, it reshaped them within newly defined territorial units. This combination of internal fragmentation and external involvement laid the groundwork for subsequent great-power penetration without institutional transformation (Zdanowski, 2025).

3.2 Cold War Militarisation and the Institutionalisation of External Security Dependence

The Cold War intensified these structural vulnerabilities by embedding the Middle East within bipolar rivalry. The United States and the Soviet Union developed bilateral patron client relations based on arms shipments, military education, and political support in lieu of regional institutionalisation (Westad, 2005). This type of strategy strengthened militarisation and enhanced security reliance.

The importation of arms in the region also grew significantly within this epoch and the conflicts in the region were usually redefined under the ideological context of the superpower rivalry. However, Cold War penetration did not solve native disputes and, in most cases, made them stronger. Outside support helped regimes to resist internal and regional pressures, and this reduced the incentives to compromise and institutional reform (Gerges, 2013). Buzan & Wæver (2003) note that regimes may get stabilised by external penetration without regions being stabilised. The Middle East was one such example of this trend.

The normalisation of external security guarantees was the main structural effect of the Cold War militarisation. Regional actors started to view exterior alignment as standard and not unique, since they saw it as an element of regime survival and deterrence. This heritage can be traced in the present-day security setups where bilateral defence alliances have remained the centre of the regional order. Therefore, the Cold War entrenched the practice of security externalisation as a structural state rather than a temporary geopolitical state (Saeed, 2025).

3.3 Unipolar Interventionism and the Limits of Transformative Power

The disintegration of the Soviet Union brought about a unipolar dominance of the United States and ultimately the 1991 Gulf War that exhibited the superior American military capacity and leadership of alliances (Westad, 2005). Nevertheless, unipolarity failed to lead to the institutionalisation of regions. Rather, the United States entrenched a hub-and-spoke security structure that was based on bilateral alliances and forward deployment (Kaye, 2022). The Iraq War of 2003 revealed the weakness of transformative intervention. The invasion was meant to re-establish regional order but instead destabilised a central balancing state and enhanced sectarian fragmentation (Gerges, 2013). Instead of producing an overlay — an external force suppressing local tensions, the intervention increased the insecurities of people and weakened normative authority. Halliday (2005) argues that when working with deep-rooted political cleavages, external intervention in the Middle East has produced unintended consequences in the past.

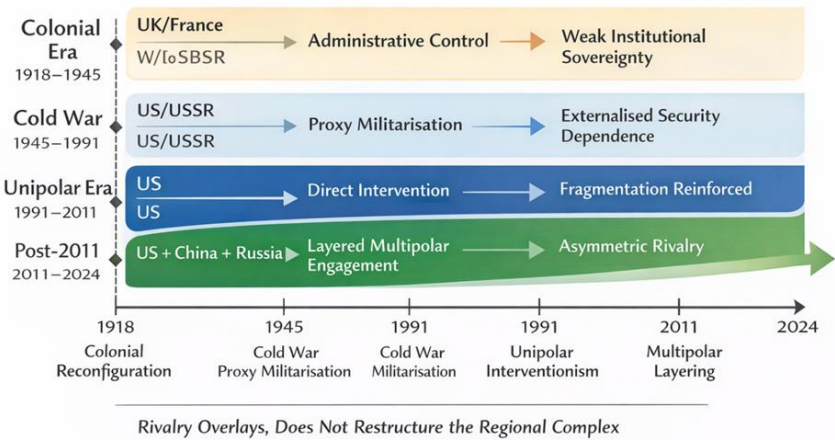
The third structural constraint generated by this episode was the enormous political and reputational costs involved in serious military restructuring. The Iraq experience taught external powers a lesson of great caution when it comes to large-scale change. To the United States, it created intervention fatigue and reputational harm; to China, it set a good example of the dangers of military involvement. As a result, modern competition develops in the environment where the transformative intervention seems to be prohibitively expensive (Hoffman, 2025).

3.4 Post-2011 Multipolar Layering Without Structural Transformation

The post-2011 phase, labelled in Figure 2 as layered multipolar engagement, represents not a transition to bipolar competition but the addition of new external nodes onto an already fragmented system (Chen et al., 2023). Russian interference in Syria and expansion of Chinese economic networks failed to destroy the security structure of the United States. Instead, these developments introduced additional penetration levels into the existing structures (Islam & Islam, 2025). The chronological sequence shows that each historical phase accumulates rather than replaces the previous one. Colonial weakness still exists under Cold War militarisation; Cold War dependency still exists under unipolar interventionism, and unipolar fragmentation still exists under the present multipolar engagement.

Therefore, the ensuing arrangement is not that of a hegemony substitution but an asymmetric rivalry. The United States upholds its military supremacy, the position which deals with the legacies of the Cold War and the unipolar periods, and China expands its economic links without undertaking the security-related duties. The stratification of the layers increases the cost of the direct displacement and facilitates the differentiation at a domain scale (Hoffman, 2025; Islam & Islam, 2025).

Figure 2: Historical Layers of External Penetration in the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex (1918-2024) (Author, 2026)



3.5 Structural Implications for Contemporary Rivalry

The cumulative results of colonial fragmentation, Cold War militarisation, unipolar interventionism, and multipolar layering lead to a regional order of tenuous institutional integration, a high level of conflict density, and a high level of dependence of the external security. These features increase the expenses of hegemonic substitution and reduce the motivation of direct military balancing. The growth of the Chinese economic engagement is not expected to give any security superiority, as the security architecture of the region is tied to the well-established United States military networks (Niblock, 2020). Conversely, the primacy of the United States military does not undermine Chinese influence because economic

interdependence occurs via specific institutional networks (Chen et al., 2023). As a result, structural fragmentation rewards domain differentiation as opposed to systemic displacement. Table 2 summarises the historical stages, with the long-term structural impacts.

Table 2: *Historical Phases and Structural Consequences*

Period	Dominant External Actor	Type of Penetration	Structural Effect
1918-1945	UK/France	Colonial administration	Artificial states
1945-1991	US/USSR	Proxy militarisation	External dependency
1991-2003	US	Security dominance	Hub-spoke order
2003-2011	US overstretch	State collapse	Fragmentation
2011-present	US + China + Russia	Layered penetration	Asymmetric rivalry

In general, historical path dependence has resulted in a penetrated but resistant to change regional security complex. These structural limitations explain why the China-US rivalry is marked by asymmetric and indirect expressions and not direct bipolar opposition. The following part explores the way these structural conditions define domain-specific modes of competition.

4. Domains of Asymmetric Rivalry

4.1 Military Primacy and the Persistence of US Security Architecture

Despite intensifying global rivalry, the military balance in the Middle East remains overwhelmingly tilted in favour of the United States. The United States has a large-scale forward presence, defence cooperation deals, intelligence-sharing deals, and arms-transfer networks throughout the region. In the context of strategic reorientation, Washington is still the first-line external security guarantor of various states in the region (Kaye, 2022; DoD, 2025).

More importantly, China has not tried to challenge this architecture directly. Although Beijing has made small steps in terms of naval deployment to anti-piracy missions, incremented defence diplomacy, such as conducting joint exercises with Egypt, the UAE, and trilateral operations with Iran and Russia, it has avoided the establishment of a similar alliance framework and forward military posture (Niblock, 2020; DoD, 2025; Al-Monitor, 2025). This reservation is a measure of rational strategizing and structural limitation. As Section 3 showed, efforts to implement transformative intervention in the Middle East have traditionally come at high political and reputational costs, and the Chinese leadership seems to be hyper-conscious of such dispensations.

In addition, the military balancing of the Middle East must involve not only demonstrating authority but also a significant commitment to the network of confrontation in the region. Given the density of conflict and the extent to which disputes intersect, direct military rivalry would involve an increased fear of the

rapid escalation of the conflict. As a result, the military sphere remains the preserve of the United States, and China makes no attempt to balance it (Hoffman, 2025; DoD, 2025). This is an example of a case of asymmetric rivalry: one of the actors maintains the coercive primacy, and the other tries to increase its power by means of non-military tools.

4.2 Economic Statecraft and Expanding Chinese Networks

If military competition is muted, economic engagement has become the principal arena of Chinese expansion. Infrastructure investment, energy relations, logistics, and trade integration have also integrated China so deeply into the regional political economy (Chen et al., 2023). The Belt and Road Initiative has helped to cooperate in ports, industrial zones, and telecom infrastructure in multiple states of the Middle East, with the region taking in massive BRI investment in 2024-2025 (Green FDC, 2026; Scobell, 2024).

Economic interaction does not require alignment in the way military alliance does. The regional states can maintain security relations with Washington and at the same time increase trade ties with Beijing. The fact that economic statecraft is not exclusive makes it especially compatible with hedging strategies (da Vinha, 2022). Despite the United States having historically dominated the energy market in the region, it has not managed to replicate the infrastructural growth of China. The comparative advantage that Washington has in terms of security provision and not development financing remains. This fragmentation further supports the distinction of spheres, which highlights the fact that economic growth does not necessarily result in security displacement (Green FDC, 2026; ThinkChina, 2026).

4.3 Technological Competition and Weaponised Interdependence

One of the areas of growing contestation is the technological infrastructures; digital networks, telecommunication systems, and data governance systems have become increasingly important tools of influence projection, and the notion of weaponised interdependence clarifies how the domination over economic and technological networks can result in geopolitical power (Farrell and Newman, 2019). In the Middle East, the rivalry of 5G networks, digital infrastructure, and other advanced technologies is an area of partial convergence between US and Chinese interests, where the United States has expressed its concerns about Chinese telecommunications providers, making technological interaction a national-security issue (Winkler, 2023; Atlantic Council, 2024).

However, the local authorities often focus on economic efficiency and growth requirements, thus making it difficult to implement technological decoupling (Scobell, 2024). This area reveals that rivalry may be enhanced regardless of militarisation; however, technological rivalry is still limited because regional nations do not want to align only by this method, which maintains asymmetric rivalry even on the areas of partial contention (Foreign Affairs, 2025).

4.4 Diplomatic Engagement and Normative Framing

Diplomatically, China has emphasised principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and economic development. This framing echoes in a territory that is historically

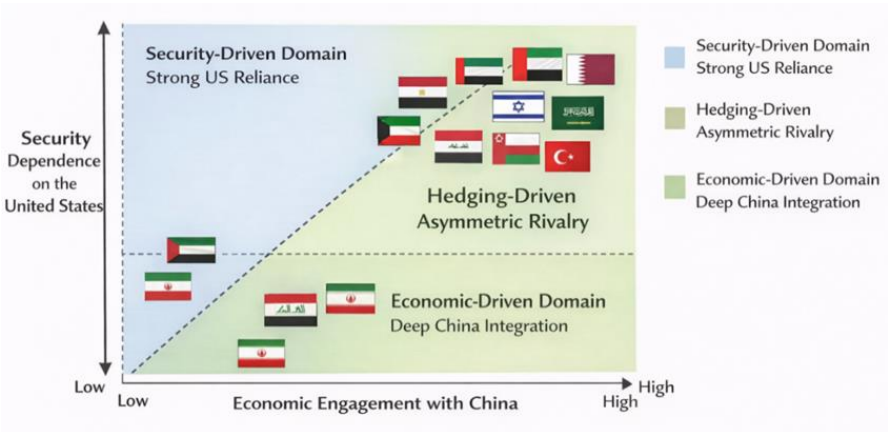
intervened and where the regime is insecure (Niblock, 2020). In comparison, American diplomacy is often associated with security guarantees, democratisation, and sanctions. Perception is affected by the normative framing of state behaviour. In as much the United States is indispensable in case of security crisis, the diplomatic posture of China is less intrusive. The receptiveness of Beijing is amplified due to such perception without the need to grow military strength (Fulton, 2025; ThinkChina, 2026). Notably, diplomatic rivalry is not hostile but stratified. Neither of the powers has strived to lock the other out of regional forums or multilateral participation wholly. As a result, the competition coexistence is expressed through parallel diplomacy instead of bloc confrontation.

4.5 Synthesis: Differentiated Instruments of Influence

The preceding domain-specific analysis demonstrates that Chinese and US competition in the Middle East is not a process of symmetrical balancing; it is an instrumentally differentiated process. Figure 3 integrates these trends into the shape of a domain-differentiated rivalry matrix, thus illustrating the region of competitive interaction in the military, economic, technological, and diplomatic domains. Figure 3 illustrates that the horizontal axis represents separate spheres of activity including military, economic, technological, and diplomatic and the vertical axis represents the relative dominance of each external actor in these spheres. The resulting structure, in its turn, displays a structurally asymmetric distribution of influence, in contrast to a convergent struggle over the same sources of power (Hoffman, 2025). In the military arena, the United States is in an overwhelmingly dominant position; its massive forward presence, defence alliances, intelligence partnerships, and weapons transfer networks are a deeply institutionalised security structure. Conversely, the military presence of China is still in the realm of the symbolic and only limited to small naval forces and defence diplomacy (Niblock, 2020; DoD, 2025). The asymmetry in Figure 3 does not just represent a difference in capability, but also a difference in strategy.

The opposite is the case in the economic sphere. The economic interdependence in the Middle East has significantly increased thanks to increasing trade, infrastructure investment, and energy partnerships in China (Chen et al., 2023; Green FDC, 2026). Even though the United States is economically salient, particularly in energy markets and financial systems, it is still no match to the scale and developmental orientation of Chinese infrastructural commitments. Therefore, Figure 3 places China at a high level of economic influence in the regional context.

Figure 3: *Domain-Differentiated Rivalry: Overlapping Dual Dependencies and Asymmetric Engagement in the Middle East (Author, 2026)*



In the technological sphere, there is partial convergence. There is strategic overlap in competition when it comes to telecommunications infrastructure, digital governance, and advanced technologies, but this competition is constrained. Although the United States expresses its security issues with Chinese technological penetration, the leadership in the region tend not to follow binary technological alignment, instead diversifying their partnerships (Farrell and Newman 2019; Atlantic Council 2024). Based on this, technological competition is moderate but not dominant on either side. In the diplomatic domain, there is parallel involvement rather than confrontation. The US remains in the middle of the security diplomacy, although China focuses on sovereignty, non-intervention, and cooperation focused on development (Chen et al., 2023; ThinkChina, 2026). The two actors have failed to lock out the other in the regional diplomatic space. Figure 3 shows that diplomatic competition is consistent with functional coexistence.

The configuration carries clear analytical implications. Competition proceeds in differentiated spheres without direct military confrontation. Military substitution would require institutional change, and economic growth does not automatically produce security displacement. Therefore, the figure presented in Figure 3 supports the main claim of the article that the asymmetric competition in the Middle East is not a transitional but a structurally determined phenomenon. The competition superimposes itself on the regional security complex without reorganising it (Hoffman, 2025).

4.6 Comparative Strategic Approaches

The asymmetric character of China-US rivalry in the Middle East becomes clearer when their strategic orientations are examined comparatively. Table 3 presents the main differences according to four dimensions, including primary instruments of influence, normative framing, risk exposure, and institutional strategy. The comparison shows that the two powers operate through differentiated rather than directly substitutive mechanisms. The United States depends on military alliances and deterrence as shown in Table 3. Its involvement in the region is based on

decades of institutionalised military cooperation, forward deployment, defence agreements, and security guarantees (Kaye 2022; DoD 2025). The strategic identity of Washington in the region is still defined by the provision of security.

China is more focused on economic statecraft and infrastructure building. Beijing has integrated into regional economies without playing the role of parallel security in any country through trade expansion, energy relationships, as well as Belt and Road-linked projects (Chen et al., 2023; Green FDC, 2026). This difference in core tools would lower strategic substitution directly. Normatively, Table 3 points opposing frames. The US is driven by the principles of order, stability, and deterrence, and China emphasises sovereignty, development and non-interference (Fulton, 2025; ThinkChina, 2026). The difference of these discursive orientations shapes the regional perceptions but does not force localised alignment.

The two approaches are also distinguished by exposure to risk. The United States has a history of expensive wars, the major one being in Iraq, which remain a source of strategic prudence (Gerges, 2013). The posture of China is relatively risk-averse and selective as it does not engage in serious military involvement in the face of regional instability (Hoffman, 2025; JCFA, 2026). Such disparity in exposure reinforces differentiated engagement. At the institutional level, the United States can use bilateral defence networks, whereas China can use commercial and financial connections. These institutional strategies operate simultaneously as summarised in Table 3. Economic expansion is not automatically negated by military dominance and economic penetration is not necessarily accompanied by the displacement of established security structures (Brookings, 2026; Hoffman, 2025).

The comparative evidence thus substantiates the main argument of the article: competition is asymmetric due to structural differentiation of strategic tools. Instead of formation of hegemonic substitution, competition stabilises into stratified coexistence across separate domains (Hoffman, 2025; Fulton, 2025).

Table 3: *US and China Strategic Approaches in the Middle East*

Variable	United States	China
Primary Instrument	Military alliances & deterrence	Economic statecraft & infrastructure
Normative Frame	Order, security, stability	Sovereignty, development, non-interference
Risk Exposure	High historical intervention	Risk-averse, selective engagement
Institutional Strategy	Bilateral defence networks	Commercial & financial networks

4.7 Critical Insight

The main thesis of the article is supported by the sphere analysis it is observed that historical path-dependence has given rise to a regional milieu in which hegemonic substitution would imply cross-domain change. The growth of the Chinese economy does not replace the U.S. military framework. Meanwhile, the American security hegemony does not remove the Chinese business connections. The fragmentation of the regional security complex promotes parallel interaction and not a wholesale

systemic dislocation of players. The discussion that follows examines the way players in the region mediate these dynamics through hedging and diversification.

5. Regional Agency, Hedging, and the Management of Rivalry

5.1 Regional Agency in a Penetrated Security Complex

While structural fragmentation constrains hegemonic substitution, regional actors are not passive recipients of great-power rivalry. Regional Security Complex Theory states that security interdependence is shaped primarily by local dynamics, not only by outside intervention (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The needs of regime survival, economic diversification, and domestic legitimacy influence the choices of foreign policymakers in the Middle East (Halliday, 2005). As a result, the governments of the region view the China-US competition based on practical grounds, putting security assurances, economic growth, and stability of the regimes ahead of ideological orientation. The regional actors consequently are interested in taking advantage of both powers without engaging in the zero-sum game (da Vinha, 2022; Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Such a position of strategic stance helps to strengthen asymmetric rivalry by avoiding the formation of blocs. In contrast to the bipolarity of the Cold War where policy choice was often constrained by ideological orientation, the modern-day competition is occurring in an environment where the states of the region are more autonomous and have more choices outside of the region. This agency plays a central role in the realisation of bounded rivalry (Mahmood & Askari, 2025; Aboudouh, 2026).

5.2 Hedging as Strategic Adaptation

Hedging requires conceptual precision, since it is frequently used loosely to describe any form of diversification. In the sense used here, hedging denotes an insurance-seeking strategy pursued under conditions of structural uncertainty, in which a state simultaneously maintains return-maximising and risk-contingency options rather than committing to a single external patron (Cheng-Chwee, 2008). It is therefore distinct from balancing, which concentrates capabilities against an identified threat, and from bandwagoning, which accepts subordination in exchange for protection. Hedging is rational precisely where the identity of the future dominant actor is indeterminate and where the costs of premature commitment exceed the costs of ambiguity.

In the Middle East, hedging takes several concurrent forms. Regional states retain American defence agreements, intelligence cooperation, and arms procurement while expanding Chinese infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications partnerships (Kaye, 2022; Chen et al., 2023). They diversify multilateral affiliations, including engagement with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, without withdrawing from Western-centred security arrangements. They also decline binary technological alignment, preserving access to competing digital ecosystems (Atlantic Council, 2024). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 illustrates the pattern most clearly, coupling economic transformation and partnership diversification with the retention of established security guarantees (Qin & Razali, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Comparable manoeuvring is evident across Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). What unites these behaviours is their non-exclusivity: each expands optionality without foreclosing an existing

relationship. Hedging is not cost-free. This requires a delicate diplomatic balancing to ensure that neither great power is antagonised. However, the operational fragmentation of the area increases the practicability of hedging initiatives. Without a unified regional bloc, the individual states can pursue differentiated policies without provoking pressure for systemic realignment (Aboudouh, 2026).

5.3 Structural Constraints on Escalation

Regional agency interacts with structural conditions to constrain escalation. Three mechanisms are particularly significant. A high conflict density increases the stakes involved in open great-power conflict; third-party actors have to balance between conflicting interests, alliances, and regime anxieties, all of which do not promote open military rivalry (Hoffman, 2025). Second, economic interdependence reduces the incentives to use zero-sum exclusionary policies; China is a key trading partner and consumer of energy to several Middle Eastern countries (Chen et al., 2023), and the United States is the key security actor, and breaking its relationship with either player would be extremely costly (Aboudouh, 2026). Third, the survival needs of regimes favour stability over ideological alignment: leaders consistently craft pragmatic foreign policies aimed at avoiding polarisation (Wang et al., 2025; Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). These structural constraints are summarised in Table 4.

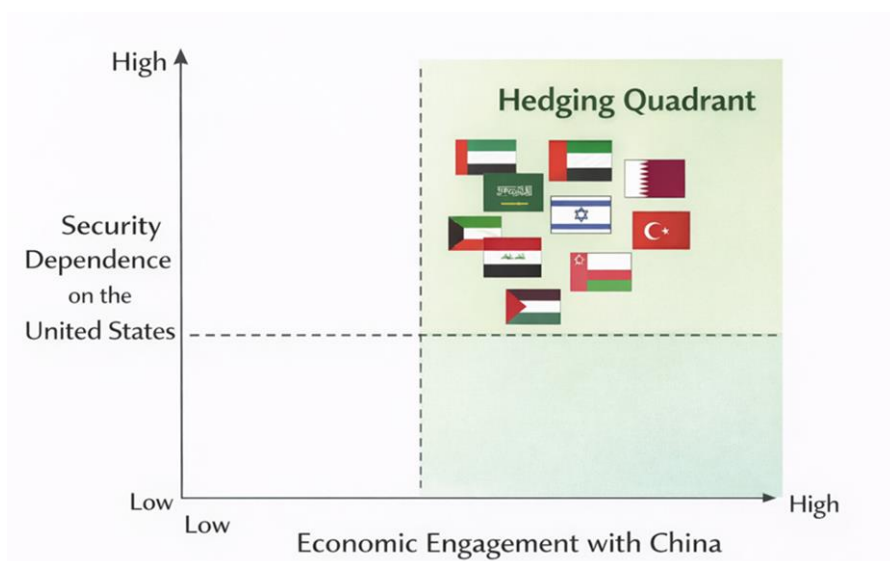
Table 4: *Structural Constraints Limiting Bipolar Escalation*

Constraint	Effect on US Strategy	Effect on China Strategy	Regional Outcome
High conflict density	Limits appetite for intervention	Discourages military expansion	Military asymmetry persists
Economic interdependence	Complicates technological decoupling	Encourages commercial engagement	Domain differentiation
Regime survival priorities	Sustains security partnerships	Enhances receptivity to non-interference	Hedging behaviour

5.4 Visualising Hedging Behaviour

The interaction between structural constraint and regional agency is best illustrated through the hedging behaviour of Middle Eastern states. This dynamic is conceptualised in figure 4, which addresses the connexion between security dependence and economic diversification. The vertical axis represents security dependence on the United States and the horizontal axis represents economic engagement with China. As illustrated in Figure 4, most of the regional states fall into the high security dependence on the United States and high economic involvement with China (Wang et al., 2025; Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025; Aboudouh, 2026). Such a placement is analytically important, which means that the growth of the Chinese economic relationship did not necessarily decrease the dependence on the U.S. security assurances. The networks of defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, and arms procurement are still highly institutionalised (Kaye, 2022), even though trade volumes and infrastructure relationships with China are gaining momentum (Chen et al., 2023; Green FDC, 2026).

Figure 4: *Hedging Behaviour Model in the Middle East (Author, 2026)*



This dual positioning is a factor of strategic diversification and not a shift in alignment. Governments in the region aim to maximise economic possibilities and minimise the security risk, thus maintaining flexibility in the circumstances of systemic uncertainty (Mahmood, 2025; Strategy International, 2026). In this regard, hedging serves as a rational reaction to a fragmented security environment typified by external penetration and regime-focused perceptions of threats (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Cheng-Chwee, 2008; Aboudouh, 2026).

The analytical implication of Figure 4 is that hedging behaviour stabilises asymmetric rivalry. The regional players slow the bloc crystallisation process by remaining active in developing security relationships with the United States and at the same time, increasing economic interdependence with China. As such, alignment is never polarised. Competition between China and the US in the Middle East therefore does not reduce to bipolar confrontation; it stabilises as competitive coexistence in differentiated domains (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025; ThinkChina, 2026).

5.5 Critical Synthesis

Regional agency operates within structural constraint rather than overriding it. The instability of the Middle Eastern security complex in its fragmented state of weak institutions, intersecting conflicts and pervasive outside intrusion, contributes to the environment promoting hedging behaviour. This kind of fragmentation reduces the likelihood of firm alliances, and hedging, conversely, hampers the process of institutions being rallied behind one great power. The interaction that follows creates a stabilising equilibrium. The externalities of historical stratification limit the possible hegemonic replacements, and the regional diversification strategies soften the polarisation. As a result, China-United States rivalry is asymmetric, with the United States holding military superiority, China increasing its economic weight,

and regional actors sustaining dual engagement. The next section extends these observations beyond the Middle East and draws out their implications for international relations theory.

6. Implications Beyond the Middle East

6.1 Regional Structure as a Mediating Variable in Systemic Rivalry

The preceding analysis demonstrates that China-US competition in the Middle East cannot be adequately explained by systemic power transition alone. Structural realism focuses on how capabilities are distributed on the global level (Waltz, 2014), but the situation in the Middle East demonstrates that regional security systems mediate systemic rivalry in decisive ways. In highly institutionalised areas, the expansion of rising powers can produce consolidation of alliances and the creation of blocs. In incomplete and penetrated regional security complexes, by contrast, structural obstacles to hegemonic substitution exist by virtue of historical layers of external intervention, poor institutional integration, and localised rivalry. The Middle East is an example of this latter situation (Hoffman, 2025).

This observation implies a more general theoretical development: systemic rivalry is not transmitted uniformly across the regions. Rather, the regional security complexes should be seen as mediating environments in which they influence how the great-power competition is manifested. Asymmetric and domain-differentiated rivalry is more probable than bipolar realignment when institutions in the region are weak and the density of conflict is high (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Mahmood & Askari, 2025).

6.2 Contrasting the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East

A comparative glance at the Indo-Pacific underscores this argument. The East Asian alliance systems are highly institutionalised, state capacity is relatively high, and competition based on maritime security is mainly associated with a territorial conflict. As a result, the US transnational competition with China in the region is increasingly centred around the military balancing and coalition-building (Winkler, 2023). In comparison, the Middle East is typified by the lack of regional security institutions and is rather characterised by overlapping conflicts and regime-centred threat perceptions. Military substitution in such an environment would require far-reaching intervention in several conflict theatres. The direct displacement strategies are discouraged by the attendant costs and risks of such involvement (Hoffman, 2025; Brookings, 2026). A generalisable suggestion here is that hegemonic substitution is more likely to occur in a region that has coherent institutional architecture and a less fragmented form of conflict. On the other hand, competition is directed to differentiated areas in fragmented areas (Mahmood & Askari, 2025; Zhao, 2025).

6.3 Conditions for the Breakdown of Asymmetric Rivalry

Although current dynamics favour competitive coexistence, asymmetric rivalry is not inherently stable. The equilibrium might be threatened by three conditions. First, the significant increase in Chinese military force could attract counterbalancing responses in the United States. However, to achieve such an expansion, it would be necessary to overcome logistical obstacles and address reputational issues that were based on historical experience (Niblock, 2020; DoD, 2025). Second, imposed

technological decoupling may reduce the viability of hedging strategies. If technological networks are mutually exclusive, subregional actors are likely to face pressure to align further (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Atlantic Council, 2024).

Third, a regional war that involves significant great-power resources directly would undermine domain differentiation and thus bind military and economic rivalry (Hoffman, 2025; JCFA, 2026). Currently, none of these contingencies seems to be completely realised. Structural fragmentation continues to dampen incentives for escalation (ThinkChina, 2026).

6.4 Theoretical Contributions to International Relations

This study contributes to international relations theory in three significant ways. First, it builds on the tools of Regional Security Complex Theory, showing that structural resilience to hegemonic substitution can be developed in the face of cumulative external penetration. Classical RSCT recognised penetration but did not theorise asymmetric rivalry among extrinsic actors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Zhao, 2025).

Second, it advances power-transition theory by adding the regional structure as a conditioning variable. The growth of emerging power does not necessarily generate bipolarity, and its impact itself depends on the institutional structure within the region (Waltz, 2014; Mahmood & Askari, 2025). Third, it incorporates the concept of competitive coexistence into the context of structural realism that demonstrates that coexistence can occur both because of strategic forbearance and structural limitations (She, 2021; Hoffman, 2025). As a result, the Middle Eastern case study provides a correction to the deterministic understandings of systemic rivalry.

7. Policy and Strategic Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for both regional and external actors operating within the Middle Eastern security environment.

First, external actors, especially the United States, need to recognise the inherent structural limitations to the attempt at any transformative interventions in fragmented regional security complexes. History has shown that efforts to re-order the region through military means have been very expensive without producing sustainable institutional effects (Gerges, 2013; Kaye, 2022). Stability management and selective involvement should be used as the foundation of the strategy in the future instead of radical changes in the system.

Secondly, the Chinese strategy of economic involvement without the simultaneous security pledges seems structurally consistent with the Middle Eastern setting (Niblock, 2020). Nonetheless, the maintenance of this strategy will require careful management of the exposure risks as the economic presence grows. With the growing interdependence, it might put pressure on more political and security engagement, which might be difficult to maintain its current risk-averse position (Chen et al., 2023).

Third, the regional states ought to persist with hedging strategies coupled with greater institutional coordination. Although the diversification increases the strategic autonomy, over-fragmentation can undermine long-term regional stability.

Stepwise moves towards issue-based cooperation, especially economic and technological fields can help to alleviate the dangers of unregulated competition.

Fourth, the two superpowers ought to recognise competition in the Middle East is structurally mediated and cannot result in hegemonic substitution. Any policies that seek to impose binary alignment more so in technological or economic spheres would run the risk of destabilising a system that is already functioning by means of controlled coexistence (Farrell and Newman, 2019).

Overall, the evidence indicates that successful activity in the Middle East is dependent upon coherence with the prevailing structural realities and not attempts to supersede them. Asymmetric rivalry is a feature with which strategies that are accommodating, tolerant of parallel influence and minimising escalation risks are more prone to maintaining stability.

8. Conclusion

China-US competition in the Middle East defies conventional expectations of hegemonic substitution and bipolar alignment. Despite the rising intensity of competition in the world arena, the United States remains militarily dominant, and China expands its influence largely at the economic and infrastructural level. Paradoxically, local players have embraced hedging policies that strengthen a state of competitive co-existence as opposed to the establishment of homogeneous blocs. The article argues that these outcomes are not accidental but are due to structural conditions. A regionally pervasive and internally fragmented complex of security has been created by historical layers, such as colonial fragmentation, Cold War militarisation, unipolar interventionism, and the multipolar layering. In this environment, the cost of hegemonic substitution becomes prohibitively expensive, and competition occurs through asymmetric realms of differentiation.

These findings point to a more general theoretical conclusion: the great-power competition is mediated by the regional security arrangements. The shift of power at the systemic level does not create homogenous regional conditions, instead, historically formed security complexes define the course, level, and nature of competition. Future research needs to examine whether similar trends might be traced in other fragmented regions and explore how the changing patterns of technological interdependence might reorganise the relations between domain differentiation and systemic confrontation. The Middle East today shows that great-power competition does not have to be destructive but can be constructive and confined.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- [1] Aboudouh, A. (2026). The Gulf's Critical Minerals Balancing Act. *Observer Research Foundation Middle East*. ORFME. <https://orfme.org/expert-speak/the-gulfs-critical-minerals-balancing-act>
- [2] Al-Monitor. (2025). China adjusts to Middle East turbulence in 2025, faces challenges in Iran, Yemen. <https://www.al-monitor.com/newsletter/2025-12-31/china-adjusts-middle-east-turbulence-2025-faces-challenges-iran-yemen>
- [3] Atlantic Council. (2024). Assessing US-China tech competition in the Global South. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/strategic-insights-memos/assessing-us-china-tech-competition-in-the-global-south>
- [4] Fulton, J. (2025). Present without impact? How the Middle East perceives China's diplomatic engagement? *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Present-without-impact.pdf>.
- [5] Bakir, A., & Al-Shamari, N. (2025). The art of hedging: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE manoeuvres amid US-China great power competition. *Third World Quarterly*, 46(7), 773-794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2509574>
- [6] Brookings. (2026). Redrawing global boundaries? The United States, China, and the viability of spheres of influence in the 21st century. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/redrawing-global-boundaries-the-united-states-china-and-the-viability-of-spheres-of-influence-in-the-21st-century>
- [7] Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security* (Vol. 91). Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Chaziza, M. (2024). The US-China rivalry in the Middle East: Confrontation or competitive coexistence. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 11(2), 231-252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989241240899>
- [9] Chen, J., Yang, X., Wang, M., & Su, M. (2023). Evolution of China's interaction with Middle Eastern countries under the Belt and Road Initiative. *Plos one*, 18(11), e0293426.
- [10] Cheng-Chwee, K. (2008). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: a journal of international and strategic affairs*, 30(2), 159-185.
- [11] CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies). (2025). Advancing U.S.-China Coordination amid Strategic Competition: An Emerging

- Playbook. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/advancing-us-china-coordination-amid-strategic-competition-emerging-playbook>
- [12] da Vinha, L. (2022). The Sino-American Rivalry and Arabian Gulf Security. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 8(3-4), 215-242.
- [13] DoD (U.S. Department of Defense). (2025). Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025. <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF>
- [14] Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized interdependence: How global economic networks shape state coercion. *International security*, 44(1), 42-79.
- [15] Foreign Affairs. (2025). China Is Still Winning the Battle for 5G—and 6G: America Must Do More to Compete with Huawei. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-still-winning-battle-5g-and-6g>
- [16] Gerger, F. A. (Ed.). (2013). *The new Middle East: Protest and revolution in the Arab world*. Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Green FDC. (2026). China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2025. <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2025>
- [18] Halliday, F. (2005). *The Middle East in international relations: power, politics and ideology* (Vol. 4). Cambridge University Press.
- [19] Hazbun, W. (2024). China, the United States, and the reconfiguration of Middle East geopolitics: New possibilities for conflict and order. Security in Context. <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/china-the-united-states-and-the-reconfiguration-of-middle-east-geopolitics-new-possibilities-for-conflict-and-order>
- [20] Hoffman, J. (2025). Aimless Rivalry: The Futility of US-China Competition in the Middle East. *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, No. 1000. <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/aimless-rivalry>
- [21] Islam, M. T., & Iftekhharul Islam, A. K. M. (2025). Dynamics of China-Syria relations in the context of global geopolitical transformations. *Discover Global Society*, 3(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00286-2>
- [22] JCFA. (2026). Why Is China Keeping a Low Profile as Iran Burns? <https://jcfa.org/why-is-china-keeping-a-low-profile-as-iran-burns>

- [23] Jones, C. (2025). Israel and the Gulf monarchies: a new Regional Security Complex or just complex regional security? *Middle eastern studies*, 61(3), 321-328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2025.2455378>
- [24] Karpat, K. H. (1991). A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East by David Fromkin (Book Review). *The Journal of Military History*, 55(4), 546.
- [25] Kaye, D. D. (2022). America's role in a post-American Middle East. *The Washington Quarterly*, 45(1), 7-24.
- [26] Kelanic, R. (2025). China cannot dominate the Middle East. *Defense Priorities*. https://www.defensepriorities.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/China_cant_dominat_the_Middle_East.pdf
- [27] Mahmood, A., & Askari, M. U. (2025). Shifting dynamics of Sino-American competition in multi-aligned Middle East. *Heliyon*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e41053>
- [28] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). The tragedy of great power politics (Updated ed.). W. W. Norton & Company
- [29] Niblock, T. (2020). China and the Middle East: A global strategy where the Middle East has a significant but limited place. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14(4), 481-504.
- [30] Qin, Q., & Razali, S. Z. (2025). Strategic Hedging in a Multipolar World: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Transformation Under "Vision 2030". *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 11(3), 72-89. <https://ejlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/1937>
- [31] Saeed, S. (2025). The crises in the Middle East: reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape and altering the global order. *Asian Review of Political Economy*, 4(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-024-00043-3>
- [32] Scobell, A. (2024). Forecasting China's strategy in the Middle East over the next four years. *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/forecasting-chinas-strategy-in-the-middle-east-over-the-next-four-years>
- [33] She, G. (2021). Asymmetric competition on a new battleground? Middle Eastern perspectives on Sino-US rivalry. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 14(2), 289-320.
- [34] Strategy International. (2026). *Riyadh's strategic hedging: Survival in a multipolar Middle East*. <https://strategyinternational.org/2026/02/17/publication244>

- [35] Sun, D., Ye, Y., & Al-Dhafeeire, S. K. (2025). US-China Institutional Rivalries and West Asian Countries' Divergent Responses. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2588107>
- [36] ThinkChina. (2026). China's power in the Middle East has hard limits. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/chinas-power-middle-east-has-hard-limits>
- [37] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). (2024). PART III, Competition and Conflict Chapter 5: China and the middle east. In *2024 Annual Report to Congress*. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/Chapter_5--China_and_the_Middle_East.pdf
- [38] Walt, S.M. (1987) *The origins of alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- [39] Waltz, K. N. (2014). Realist thought and neorealist theory. In *The realism reader* (pp. 124-128). Routledge.
- [40] Wang, X., Al-Dhafeeire, S. K., & Sun, D. (2025). Saudi Arabia's US-China Hedging Strategy and Its Regional Impact. *Middle East Policy*, 32(4), 18-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70027>
- [41] Westad, O. A. (2005). *The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times*. Cambridge University Press.
- [42] Winkler, S. C. (2023). Strategic competition and US-China relations: A conceptual analysis. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 16(3), 333-356.
- [43] Zdanowski, J. (2025). Variables and Dynamics of the Middle Eastern System. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe-International Relations*, 4(16), 16. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17888.3>
- [44] Zhao, Y. (2025). Beyond power transition theory: explaining the absence of US-China power shift in the Middle East. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, 1607870. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1607870>